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COVER BY PHOEBE GLOECKNER FOR "LAST SUMMER AT MARS HILL"

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 87, No. 2, Whole No. 519, August 1994. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at \$2.75 per copy. Annual subscription \$26.00; \$31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1994 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

SOMETIMES I forget how small the world of science fiction really is. We have a culture and a jargon all our own. Because most of my friends belong to that culture, and because I work in the field, I use the language of science fiction constantly.

This came home to me recently during a conversation with the book editor at a major daily newspaper. As we were talking about a science fiction event she wanted a reporter to cover, I mentioned that I was excited about the main speaker, an expert on nanotechnology.

"What?" she asked.

"Nanotechnology," I said.

"What's that?" she asked.

I hesitated. The editor reads as much as I do and she works at a daily newspaper. A lot of material crosses her desk. I was surprised that she had never heard of nanotechnology. After all, it is such a common theme in sf these days that there have even been *Star Trek* episodes about it.

As I mumbled an incoherent explanation, I felt inadequate because I couldn't cite my usual sources — Greg Bear, for example, or short stories in this magazine from Ray Vukcevich's "Mom's Little Friends" (April, 1992) to Dave Smeds' "A Marathon Runner in the Human Race" (March, 1994). When I stopped stammering, the editor asked, "How do you guys keep up on all this stuff?"

I shrugged. "It's part of the business," I said. I felt a bit guilty when the conversation ended. I made it sound as if I pored over each issue of *Science News* and debated *Discover's* articles with my friends. Actually in the sf community, science is part of the air. A whiff of nanotechnology here, a scent of virtual reality there, combined with all the advances in biology, chemistry, and physics. Our fiction explores new ideas with the same gusto it uses to explore galaxies. We are so used to that exploration we take it for granted — in our conversation, in our fiction, and in our language. And sometimes we

shut out people who come to us for the first time.

I have heard a lot of sf fans claim that we don't need outsiders in our genre. They pollute it with characterization and setting. They make the ideas less important than the human events. *They simply don't understand.*

They don't understand because we don't allow them to. We have no recognized canon for sf. We have some wonderful books, from the *Best of the Year* volumes to the awards volumes (Baen has just published another *Hugo Awards* volume, with Connie Willis taking the unenviable task of replacing Isaac Asimov as editor). But they are inaccessible to folks outside the genre.

A good reader recently complained to me that she had trouble with *Neuromancer* because she had to fight the language. My mistake. I had recommended the book to her as an example of where sf has been in the last fifteen years without considering that she rarely reads sf. I should have started her with something else, something that eased her into the genre.

The material exists. There are easier books for a newcomer to read when approaching sf for the first time. Books for all tastes, such as Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* for the his-

tory buff or Patricia Anthony's *Cold Allies* for the political thriller fan.

We should make the effort to bring non-sf readers into the genre instead of sneering at them for failing to understand genre concepts (or for enjoying books that rely on a watered down version of sf, as do some mainstream best-sellers). Because statistics show that even though sf is popular in the movies and on television, it lacks the same popularity in the publishing world. (Even though the newspaper editor hadn't read much sf, she had seen every *Star Trek* movie.) Somehow the movie goers aren't flooding the sf section and I think, in part, it is because the sf community has its doors closed and locked to anyone who doesn't know the secret handshake.

An odd attitude for people who claim to appreciate the new, the strange, and the different. Even odder for folks who like fiction that challenges the mind as well as the soul.

We need these readers. Science fiction readers often make fun of romance readers — a scary thing when romance readers outnumber sf people by nearly three to one. I am not saying that we should change our genre to accommodate people who are peeking in the door. I merely suggest that if someone expresses a desire to travel with us to a strange

new world, we take her gently by the hand and introduce her around before we place her in the middle of a highly technical discussion of things of which she has never heard.

My duty as an editor is to remember that each issue should attract new readers, and each issue should have one newcomer-friendly story. It was quite a shock to me to

discover that, even though I try to keep an open-door policy, I am out of touch. It is our duty as readers to share our enthusiasm about sf with our interested friends — not to scare them away by proving their ignorance, but to welcome them to this glittery place with open arms, explaining the jargon and sharing the culture.



Jack McDevitt made his first appearance in F&SF in our January issue with his story, "Standard Candles." This time he returns with a hard science fiction story.

Jack has written three novels. His first, The Hercules Text, was a Terry Carr Ace Special. His third, Engines of the Night, will appear in October from Ace/Berkeley, and Easton Press will publish it in its Masterpieces of Science Fiction series.

About "Glory Days," he writes, "It was born out of noticing that TV starships seem populated exclusively with officers. There's no one to scrub the decks. (This fact offends my old naval sensibilities.) No doubt, those sorts of tasks have been turned over to machines. But all this got me to thinking about automation and janitors."

Glory Days

By Jack McDevitt

THE OPERATIONS CENTER, ladies and gentlemen. Contrary to popular opinion, this was the real heart of the starship. This was where things hap-

pened. You'll also notice, by the way, that the Venture is the only place on Skyrise that has real artificial gravity. Uh, please, madame, stay on this side of the rope. Landings and ground activities were controlled from here, weather and other local conditions monitored, astronomical efforts coordinated. The Venture was capable of receiving more information every second than is contained between the covers of all the books in the Montague Public Library. The rescue of Matuba was planned and executed from here, and technicians sat at these positions and listened helplessly while Peter Bolieau and his team were destroyed. Bantha Morgan sent the Elian CONTACT message — Excuse me, sir, could you move a little, just a little, that's good — from right here. And the last message from outside was received in this room. Unfortunately, we don't know at which position, or by whom. No record exists. And for those of you who count such things, that was

eighty-two years ago.

I should have realized right away that Lenny was up to something. I mean, it was a strange time to be pushing a long-handled broom across the bridge. But there he was, shoving the accumulated dirt into a dust pan.

But time was short, and I didn't have time for trivia. "Lenny," I said, "you do know they've ordered the evacuation, right?" This had been coming for weeks, so there were no klaxons, no alarms, no rushing around. By then, there were barely a dozen people left on Skyrise.

Lenny was on one knee, near the command chair, finishing up. Its black leather pads glistened in the soft lighting. I liked the bridge: the illumination was soothing, and it seemed to flow from all the overhead panels and the walls. You never had to squint into a glare, or hold something up to the light. It was a hell of a lot better than ordinary bulbs. Problem was that nobody understood how the lights worked. Like everything else.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Late." I looked at my watch to emphasize the point. We were down under an hour, and nobody was going to wait around. Anybody who was late would head to a better world. "You better get to the Tube."

"I guess." He glanced around the bridge, at the view screens and the consoles and the crew's stations and the ship's schematic. I *liked* Lenny. Everybody did. He'd started as a tour guide thirty years before, become a station fixture, and was, by this time, a legend. He had always been associated with the starship in one way or another, had arranged concerts in its recreation areas, had orchestrated visits by school children, had passed his waterhole time with the engineers, and had eventually become something of a reigning expert himself. There were even stories that he could talk to the *Venture*. Not just to the response systems, but to Command & Control. To its inner workings. Well, we all knew *that* was mythical; but I also knew this was a hard time for him.

He was close to retirement now, a man of average height and rather ordinary appearance, save for startling blue eyes. His white hair was neatly combed, and he wore the carefully pressed shirt and black string tie which had once been part of the tour guide's uniform. I wished the crisis could have held off a few more months, until Lenny was gone.

"I'll tell you," he said, getting up, and tapping the contents of the

dustpan into a bag, "I still can't see why we're giving up without a fight."

I crossed the room and sat in the command chair. It was a good feeling: the chair seemed to radiate power, as if it were connected directly into the heart of the ship. I caught a flicker in Lenny's eyes of barely disguised disapproval. "I don't think it's a case of anyone giving up," I said.

He looked at me as if I should not be allowed out alone after dark. "I wouldn't know how else to describe it."

I'd been through all this. I'd been through it with the Director, with the Board, with the survey team. And I did not feel like going through it again. Even with Lenny. So I sighed, and opened my arms in a plea for understanding, and threw the blue switch. The POWER indicator blinked on. "Activate navigation," I said, talking toward the overhead. It was a spooky feeling.

The systems came to life. Numbers which meant nothing to me slid across displays, lamps went green, and relays clicked in the walls. Main screen showed the *Venture's* silver hull inserted halfway into its bay at the station hub, like a torpedo awaiting ignition.

"They could have *tried*," Lenny said.

"They *did* try, Lenny. You know that. But nobody really understands the equipment. Or what needs to be done." It was okay when the skyhook made its own adjustments, as it had for several hundred years. But things had begun to break down, and nobody knew the firing sequence. Or had the theoretical knowledge to figure it out. If we took a chance and got it wrong, a lot of hardware would go down. There was a city at the bottom of the elevator, and a dozen others along the equatorial track. The price for failure would be catastrophic.

"We're going to lose a lot of technology," said Lenny. He stared at me, as if I personally were responsible for the present situation. "We've known for years this was coming," he said. "*Years.*"

I looked at my watch again, hoping to derail him. He was right, of course: we'd had all the time in the world to look at the problem, try to understand the computers, maybe just figure out how to do it manually. But it was too late now.

"For all we know," he continued, "the thing still works. If someone were willing to take a chance, we could try it. Head for goddamn Star Harbor and Bernham's Swirl. Find out what they're doing. Why they aren't on the radio anymore."

The quantum drive hasn't been fired for two hundred years, Lenny. And there are no shuttles. No way to get off it once it's disconnected from Skyrise. "Let it go," I said. "We've got things to do."

He seemed to relax a little. "You know," he said, "I used to wonder about that when I first came here. Would the engines work?" He moved behind one of the crew's chairs, took a dust cloth from his pocket, and idly pressed it to the already-gleaming fabric. "What do you think?"

"I doubt it," I said. "You want the truth, Lenny, I think they'd blow up if anyone tried to start them." That was not what he wanted to hear. "Listen," I said, "it's getting late. You might want to get your stuff together and get down to the Tube."

He made himself comfortable. "I'll wait for you, if you don't mind." His brow creased. "I'm not anxious to leave. And my bags are already on the car."

The station was a skyhook, held in geosynchronous orbit over Port Darby, where its long elevator tube was anchored groundside into Broadside Terminal. The weight of the tube was stabilized by a ten-thousand-kilometer-long counterpoise, which trailed out beyond the station like an enormous tail.

The problem was that three moons created a need for periodic adjustments in the station's orbit. And the system had failed. The experts thought the strains on the tube were becoming severe enough to tear it out of the ground, or to drag the station and the counterpoise down in what promised to be a major disaster.

The solution was to cut the Tube. If everything went well, Skyrise would be dragged into space by the counterpoise, and the great shaft that had connected it with Port Darby would disappear into the clouds.

The idea was to cut the Tube as close to the ground as possible, to minimize damage from falling debris. But the presence of the starship added mass and introduced an additional instability. I had been assigned to cut the ship loose, to get it into a higher orbit and away from the station.

"I think," said Lenny, reading my mind, "that we'd be better off, even now, to take our chances, and try to fix the tumble."

I sighed. "You probably wouldn't feel that way if you lived near the base of the Tube," I said.

He nodded. "I know. But you're putting the whole of Colian Age technology up where nobody will ever be able to reach it. I don't think

anybody's going to thank us for this."

These are the engines. There are eight of them, although the ship only requires four. This one over here is believed to be the original unit installed in the ship at the time of its construction at Randipor. The star drive operated on a quantum principle that is no longer clearly understood. The ship did not actually cross interstellar distances. Rather, it traveled in the way that an electron does: it blinked out of existence here, and turned up there. Although there was no sense of the passage of time on the ship, the reappearance was not immediate, and the duration is known to have been a function of distance. A sister ship, the Tau Kai, made the only intergalactic voyage, a flight to the Lesser Magellanic. What's that, son? Do they still work? We don't really know. The status boards say no, but the computers aren't reliable anymore. So if you're wondering whether we could launch the Venture, and travel, say, to Arkard's Star and say hello, the answer is, maybe.

"Jon, are you there?" Ann Tower's voice erupted from the sound system in a burst of static.

"I'm here, locked on, and ready to go."

"Okay. We are going to release the clamps."

I studied the screens. The thick hull of the starship projected from the center of the wheel like a missile that had struck, and become embedded in, its target.

Lenny sat down at one of the consoles. His expression was masked, but the blue eyes were intense.

"Board is going green," said Ann.

Two hundred twenty-some years had passed since the *Venture* had made port. And secured. They had not intended this to be a final landfall, but they had suspected it would be. As funds and energy dwindled, the ships had looked for homes.

"Okay, Jon. You're clear to go."

But I was getting a red light. Lenny looked at it, smiled, and shook his head.

"Negative. We are still berthed."

"Uh — Hold on a second."

Lenny stowed the cleaning gear in a supply locker behind the door. "I'm

surprised Singh committed himself to this. He really doesn't know whether it can be done."

Yes we do, Lenny. We're not idiots. "We ran tests last night. Did everything except fire the thrusters. We'll be fine."

"I hope so." He looked amused. "Singh guaranteed the ship would be away from the station, didn't he?"

"Yes," I said. "We should have done it earlier."

"I suppose. But I think everyone's reluctant to let it go."

"How's it read now?" asked Ann.

The red lights blinked. Flickered. Went green.

"Okay. I think we're clear."

Lenny watched, saying nothing. His face was a mask.

"Listen," I said. "I know this is hard on you."

His eyes cooled and became very distant.

I looked around the bridge. The first time I'd seen it had been in a picture in a third or fourth grade book. They'd had the positions marked, but I only knew a couple: helmsman there, navigation on the Captain's left, five more positions for God-knew-what, the wall-sized viewscreen (which had not worked during the lifetime of anyone currently on the station), a coffee cup which was reputed to have belonged to Ilena Cott herself.

Well, Lenny was probably right. Who today could build a shuttle? Good-bye, *Venture*.

"Is there anything else we need to move out of the ship?" I asked him. We had not tried to salvage individual pieces of equipment. No one understood how it worked, or the way it was strung together. Consequently, the decision had been taken to leave it intact. For some future generation.

"No."

There was something in his tone, something that caught my ear, and left me looking closely at the old man's features, to extract some hidden significance. Lenny stared back, vaguely defiant.

"Once it starts," I said, "we'll have five minutes to get clear before the ship moves."

"Okay."

I looked up toward the overhead. "Navigation: exit program. Execute."

The screen at the navigation console snapped on. Lights at several positions winked. The figure 5:00 appeared on the board and began a

countdown.

I got out of the chair. "Okay," I said, "let's go."

THIS is C3, the Combat Control Center. The Venture was built during the height of the Dragon scare, when people thought an actual invasion was under way. The Dragons, apparently, were just passing through, but they were unrelentingly hostile to everything they met. What's that, son? Oh, no, they weren't really dragons, but they came out of the Draconian cluster. Actually, we never found out where they really originated. The Venture was with the Fleet at Korman Point and in the Gap. It was hit several times, and some of the burn marks remain to this day. You can see discolored metal at the forward weapons clusters, for example. The captain at that time was Ilena Cott, whose somewhat fictionalized story has been recounted in W. T. Bolden's celebrated frontier novels. Several excellent histories have been written about this period, and about the Venture's role in the war against the Dragons. Most are available in the station bookstore.

We stepped through the hatch into the jetway. The change from ship's gravity to the station's spin-weight always affected my balance, and I hated it. I took a moment to orient myself, while Lenny closed the airlock.

Two minutes.

I disengaged the jetway, which was the last physical link with the starship. "That's it," I said.

He nodded, and touched the cold gray hull. The first number of her fleet designation, a five, was partly visible, cut off by the sealing ring.

I'd worked with Lenny a long time, but I'd never seen him like this before. He was moody, and sometimes downright cranky. But he had subsided into a weatherbeaten silence that I didn't like at all. "You okay?" I asked him.

"I'm fine," he said.

I'd have liked to throw an arm around him, reassure him, tell him everything would be okay. But his manner deflected any thought of commiseration. Later, I decided. On the way down.

"Jon." The voice came out of the P.A. It belonged to Radley Haines, the last security guy left on board. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes. I hear you."

"Good. Is Lenny with you?"

"He's here."

"Okay. You two should get down here as quick as you can. As soon as we're all here, we'll clear out."

The trip to the surface would require three hours and ten minutes. Separation, which would be accomplished by blowing the Tube apart, was three hours and forty-four minutes away. Not a big safety margin, but it was decent.

We reached the end of the jetway, slipped through another hatch, and entered the station. Lenny seemed to be breathing hard, so we slowed down. "We've got plenty of time," I said.

He nodded. "I know," he said.

The broad, sterile corridors were empty. There had been a time when they'd been filled, crowded with tourists and travelers, people who'd wanted to say they'd been here, had seen this wonder of the old world. But they'd stopped coming when the strains had begun to show, when the first warnings had appeared in the newspapers. Six months ago, the Parks Department had shut down all non-official travel.

I counted off the last of the five minutes, standing in front of *The Mixed Bag*, which had been a shopping emporium when I'd first come to Skyrise. Its *M* hung sideways. "Okay," I said, "that should be it. The *Venture* is on its way."

Lenny nodded. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

When I was sure he was all right, we started again down the long arcing corridor. We came across Bill Kuiperman, dragging his luggage. And Maura Tenley, her arms folded, staring gloomily out at the velvet sky. All three moons were visible, floating tranquilly among the stars.

I gave Bill a hand with his bags, and Lenny drifted close to Maura, whispered something to her, and pulled her away. A minute later, we rounded a corner and had a clear view of the Terminal. Several people waited in the corridor.

The group's mood was generally upbeat. They were glad to be getting out, and were annoyed that they'd been kept on Skyrise until the last possible minute. Two were talking sports.

"Jon." Ann's voice. Flat and cold. "Jon, wherever you are,

answer up, please."

"I'm at the terminal, Ann. What's wrong?"

"We have no movement. The thrusters didn't fire."

My mouth went dry. "You're sure?"

"Yes."

The car that would take them down the tube waited, cool and gleaming, in the boarding area. Two cargo loaders were at the rear, and a technician stood by the cockpit with a checkoff sheet.

Son of a bitch. Everything had gone like clockwork last night. "Okay," I said. "I'll go back and try again."

Lenny moved up next to him. "You're getting a little short of time," he said.

This is typical of the quarters assigned to members of the settlement teams. Two persons would have occupied this space. You'll notice they're somewhat snug. There are more than a thousand accommodations of this type on board the Venture, enough to carry a complete outpost, with all its equipment. Among the more celebrated settlements launched by this ship were Brandipur, the appropriately named Devil's Beach, and Vikry. Vikry, by the way, is known to have survived well into this century and was still in communication as late as 1163. Yuri Kassa started his pilgrimage in one of these units; Ronda Sateen made the last of her Voyages in this compartment; and Michael O'Brien developed his lightbender technology here. The marines who saved Morningside and Korman Point were quartered here.

You can't run all out down those passageways. The gravity created by spinning the station ring is always off center, and is also less than ground-normal. But I hurried as fast as I could, and I crashed into a few walls enroute. I concentrated on the procedure, rerunning the steps I'd taken, trying to think where things might have gone wrong. I had to stop at the entrance to the jetway to get the hatch open, and I became aware of footsteps hurrying behind me.

It was Lenny, and he looked, I don't know, determined, upset, frustrated. All those things.

"Go back," I said.

"You'll need help."

I spotted a callbox and got through to Singh. "I'm not sure we can do this under the time limit," I said. "Can you get a delay?"

"I'll try." He sounded worried. "But they've told us there would be no extension."

We were into the jetway now and running. "Do what you can," I said. And, to Lenny: "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Ship's old, Jon. If the problem's with the thrusters, there might not be anything we *can* do. You were using a direct computer link. The ship has a central C&C function, Command and Control. We can try going right into that, and let the ship manage things. That *might* bypass the problem."

"Can we get it to work? Do you know how to do it?"

"Maybe." He pulled up to catch his breath, and I almost collided with him. "I need you to go back to the station."

"What?"

"To my quarters. There's a stack of ship's manuals in the bookracks. One of them's *Command and Control Functions*. I need you to get it for me."

"Dammit, Lenny. I can't go running off at a time like this."

"Then you're going to have to figure it out for yourself."

Son of a bitch. That was a terrible thing to ask me to do. Lenny had arrived at the airlock and was punching in the code.

I stood and glared at him. "What will you be doing?"

"Trying to get us started." The door started up. "We don't have much time to debate this."

I must have whined something because he clapped me on the shoulder and told me to pull up my socks. Then he was trundling ahead, moving more easily in the ship's artificial gravity field. The crew lived in a section called the Blue Zone. It was several minutes away from the airlock, and up two levels from the main promenade. I sprinted back through the station, goaded by pleas from Ann and Singh to get the ship moving, and from Haines to get back to the terminal. By the time I'd reached Lenny's compartment, Haines's cries had turned to dire threats that he was not going to hold the car, *could* not hold the car, and that we were cutting severely into the safety margin.

I'd spent a fair amount of time in Lenny's place over the years. We'd enjoyed drinking and speculating on why Star Harbor had stopped broadcasting in the middle of a transmission, or whether Inkasa had ever shaken off its totalitarian government. Whether we'd ever hear from any of them again.

Whether our own government could be funded into supporting the construction of a transmitter that might communicate with the far worlds. There had been landscapes on the walls then, and pictures of the *Venture* orbiting a star or taking a shuttle onboard. Lenny had also owned a small library of about two dozen books. Paper books were rare on the station, but he'd been accumulating them for years. They'd been neatly stored on two shelves of a small bookcase.

The room looked sterile now. Abandoned.

And the shelves were empty.

I opened doors, peered into closets and bathroom. Delivered some choice invective. Felt a warm panic bubbling up in my stomach. I stumbled back out into the corridor and opened a channel to the bridge.

"Lenny."

"Here, Jon." He sounded painfully calm.

"Lenny, where are they? I don't see any manuals."

"Aren't they on the bookshelf?"

"No. There's *nothing* on the bookshelf." I could hear the crackle of static in the circuit.

"Maybe it won't matter. I think I've got it figured out."

"Good." I started back. Hesitated. "You sure?" I was reluctant to leave the apartment without doing a more thorough search.

"Probably."

"Okay. I'm on my way."

"No. We're out of time, and there isn't really anything you can do here anyhow. You might as well go back to the Tube. I'll meet you there."

But I wasn't going to allow that. I ran through the crew's quarters, down to Main Level, around to the jetway entrance. Haines's voice caught me there. "Jon, please." He sounded almost in tears. I glanced at my watch. If the car left now, they would reach the terminal eight minutes before the bombs went off.

"Hang on," I cried. I don't know what that meant.

The airlock into the *Venture* was shut. I literally went to my knees, wondering what the damn fool was thinking of, and poked in the code. The door rose.

"Don't come in," said Lenny.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't been able to bypass the system. But I can override it."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I can take the ship out manually."

I froze. "You can't do that. You won't be able to get out afterward."

"If I don't do it, she stays in the cradle."

I looked back at the airlock. Down the long jetway. And opened a channel to Operations. "Singh?"

"I'm here. I've been listening."

"What do we do?"

I could visualize him standing over the console, headphone in place, the sleeves of an immaculate white shirt rolled onto his forearms. "Jon," he said, "do what it takes. But find a way to kick the *Venture* free."

"I'm not sure we can do it."

"Jon. That's all that matters."

Lenny's voice: "I need the airlock closed."

I stared at the open hatch.

"Lenny," said Singh, "Thanks."

"No, Lenny." It was the worst goddam minute of my life.

"Close the airlock," Lenny pleaded. "Stay or go. Whatever you want. But *close* the lock. We're out of time."

"For God's sake, Jon," said Singh. "Do it."

The shining interior of the starship seemed to lose definition.

"Lenny —"

"Go on. Get out. There's no point in everybody staying."

SOMETHING went wrong, and the *Venture* arrowed out of orbit, and sailed into space. Otherwise, the separation went smoothly, which is to say we wiped out a goodly array of hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and assorted tourist traps on the ground. But we'd evacuated them and nobody got killed.

Astronomers were able to keep the ship in view for about six months. Then it simply passed into the dark.

A lot has been written about Lenny's heroism during those final moments. And I don't sleep as well as I used to. People reassure me that there was nothing I could do, no reason for me to sacrifice myself, no reason to shoulder blame.

Maybe I got out of there a little too quick. Maybe I felt too relieved when the airlock closed behind me, and sealed me off forever from any possibility of riding with him.

There was talk for a while of going after him with one of the old shuttles. But none could be found that seemed to offer even a remote chance. And, although there was no shortage of volunteers, in the end nothing came of the plan.

He talked to us occasionally. Told us not to lose sleep over him. Said he had plenty of food and water. No one quite understood where that had come from, but fortunately the ship was well-stocked. And he announced that he was satisfied. That he was with the big ship, and that *she* was not alone.

That remark, or variations of it, were repeated several times. They caused some to suspect that Lenny had gone over the edge, and project managers were pleased when, without warning, the broadcasts stopped. Several days later, the ship drifted beyond the range of our telescopes.

Port Darby, which might have been the recipient of the entire structure had it been left to come down, scheduled a Day for Lenny. Cities along the equator, which also recognized him as a common benefactor, staged parades in his honor.

But something odd happened. Or didn't happen, rather. His luggage never showed up. Nor his books, which he would never have wanted to leave behind on the station. I think about that, and the missing manuals, and how the thrusters didn't respond when I tried my luck. And the fortunate circumstance of the stocked larder. And it's pretty clear what *really* happened up there.

There's only one real question in my mind, and it concerns his motivation. Is he drifting through the dark now in a ship that he couldn't bring himself to leave?

Or is he out somewhere getting firsthand answers about Star Harbor and Bernham's Swirl?





BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

PARABLES AND OTHER STUFF

X,Y, by Michael Blumlein, Dell, 1993. Pb. \$4.99.

The Parable of the Sower, by Octavia Butler, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993.

SOME YEARS ago, walking across a university campus one winter night on my way to the library, I had a non-classroom educational experience. A woman was walking toward me on the sidewalk in the darkness. As she passed me, just under a streetlight, I happened to look at her face; on it I saw on it an expression of terror. What was she afraid of? *Me*.

In that instant a simple fact that I had known intellectually came home to me emotionally. Women live in a different world than men. I was a tall man in a dark coat on a dark night in a deserted place. Though I

knew I wasn't dangerous, she didn't. Women carry this fear around with them all the time. Men don't.

This month's books are, among other things, about women in jeopardy.

The cover of Michael Blumlein's novel *X,Y* calls it "A Psychosexual Thriller." I suppose that's an accurate description, but it's also a misleading one. More than a thriller, this is a fantasy on sexual differences. It's also one of the stranger books you are likely to read this year.

The initial situation, a simple one, is established by the end of the first chapter. Frankie is an alcoholic erotic dancer; her boyfriend Terry, who's been thrown out of medical school, works in a bookstore. One night, in the middle of one of her dances at a cheap west side New York bar, Frankie and a nameless customer simultaneously pass out.

When Frankie comes around the next morning, she has lost her memory and become convinced she is a man. She has no memories of her life as a woman before that moment in the bar, nor any memories of an alternative life as a man — only the conviction, despite her female body, that she is male. She speculates that her body has become possessed by the mind of the man in the bar (and that his has become possessed by hers).

Frankie's transformation (or delusion) naturally affects her relationship with Terry, who finds it hard to understand why his previously sexually avid girlfriend will no longer sleep with him.

The notion of changing sexes is one that writers have come back to again and again, from the Greek myth of Tiresias, through Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Thorne Smith's comic novel *Turnabout*, and at least two pretty bad movies, *Goodbye Charlie* and *Switch*. It's natural for men and women (but mostly men, it seems) to speculate about what the world looks like from the other side of the sexual divide. In *X,Y*, Blumlein does something interesting by taking the crucial step of eliminating personality from Frankie's maleness. She's not a particular man, she's just *male*. So the story becomes one not about some guy's attempt to get back into his

own body, but about what it is other than biology that makes someone male or female. His story raises questions about the psychology of sexuality, about what is essential to our relationships to one another and what is arbitrary. In its own twisted way *X,Y* asks, "What is love?"

Blumlein, a doctor and, on the evidence of his previous story collection *The Brains of Rats* and his novel *The Movement of Mountains*, not squeamish about dealing with dangerous material, uses this conceit to explore the limits of sexual obsession. Cool and detached, in the midst of a nightmare of dominance and submission he stops to insert little footnoted essays on abnormal psychology, neurology, and sexual biology, justifying and commenting on the action of the story.

Although Blumlein switches viewpoint from Frankie to Terry whenever it suits his purposes, the main story is Frankie's. After the change Frankie always thinks of herself as "he" and is referred to by male pronouns, which is disconcerting and occasionally disorienting. Frankie is bewildered, vulnerable. He is not used to life as a woman. Living in present day New York, on the fringes of society, he makes errors out of naiveté that someone who has grown up female would not make. He trusts men

too much; not really understanding how much their behavior is affected by the fact that to them he is just another good looking babe, he at first puts himself unnecessarily at risk and then turns reclusive and paranoid.

Terry, who is basically a decent guy, to the degree his actions are motivated by sex grows increasingly unsympathetic. Despite "her" insistence, he never believes that Frankie has undergone any real change, is suspicious of her motives, and when he does try to help her does so mostly out of the desire to get her into the sack again. On the other hand, he is more vulnerable than he lets her know; his drive to win Frankie back is fueled by his doubts about his own worth.

One of the themes of this book seems to be that men and women might get along better if sex didn't enter into their relationships. Sex motivates most of our mistreatment of each other. The main thing it produces in X,Y is violence and coercion.

Sex alters our personalities and behavior. Terry is nice to women as long as sex doesn't enter into it. When Terry's mistreatment of Frankie finally crosses over a fatal line (I don't want to be more specific for the sake of giving away too much of Blumlein's

plot), he claims that he wasn't himself when he did it.

The ruling metaphor here is sex as possession. If Terry wasn't himself, then who was he? He wants to possess Frankie. Frankie, as far as Terry is concerned, acts as if *she* is possessed. Like a character in a classic fantasy seeking a remedy for demonic possession, Frankie even turns to voodoo for a cure. And eventually, through her sexuality, Frankie comes to possess Terry, turns him into an object, pushes him farther and farther to see if he will submit.

Terry feels that he is loved more and more, and takes as evidence of Frankie's love for him precisely those acts that Frankie intends to degrade him. Like a bad feedback loop this cycle of hate mistaken for love, revenge confused with passion, spirals toward a queasy-making conclusion.

I'm not sure how much of this Blumlein intends us to take as the normal subtext of male-female relationships, and I can't say that X,Y is a fun read, or an uplifting story—but it's a fascinating one. By its conclusion the story of Frankie and Terry becomes a haunting, iconic descent into the murky depths of sexuality. More than a horror story, this is some sort of twisted parable.

Though Octavia Butler titles her

new novel *Parable of the Sower*, ironically it is less parable-like than Blumlein's novel. *Parable* projects current social disruption in American cities into a situation of near anarchy in the year 2025.

Those people lucky enough to have jobs and unlucky enough to live in urban areas build walled communities. Inside such neighborhoods families live in an uneasy semblance of normal life, venturing out in the day, pistols on their hips, to work or shop, and at night closing everything up tight, pistols under their pillows. Guns and violence are everywhere. In the street new drugs produce new antisocial behavior. Increasing numbers of people have no stake in peaceful social order. The government is either bankrupt or totally ineffectual. People must pay for the privilege of protection. Corporations become paternal owners of their employees. Inflation has proceeded to the point where thousands of dollars are needed to buy a week's food.

We've seen variations on this future in a lot of SF books and movies in the last decade, a projection of the bottom-line mentality of the eighties and of what seems to be a diminishing belief in the possibility of mutually supportive community in America.

Against this background Butler

tells the story of Lauren Olamina, a teenage girl growing up in a neighborhood and family that are trying to hold together against the stresses outside. Her father is a strong-willed professor and minister, her stepmother intelligent but weak. They live in the walled urban neighborhood of Robledo. Outside their walls, roving gangs prey on anyone who looks vulnerable. Lauren's father organizes target practice in the hills and holds religious services in his house. Lauren's younger brother Keith, struggling against their strait-laced dad, carries his rebellion into the streets, eventually running away and joining up with a gang of thieves.

Things go from bad to worse and eventually the walls are breached and the community destroyed in a single night. Lauren and a few survivors begin an odyssey north. Along the way they pick up other refugees from disintegrating American society. Lauren intends to found a new society based on a religion she has developed that she calls "Earthseed." For Lauren, god is change and human destiny is to populate the stars. It is up to individuals to shape god by taking control of their own lives.

The social situation in this book is difficult to parse. In some ways it is a standard breakdown-of-society scenario, of which we have seen more

and more in the last decade in SF and out. Butler is expert at delineating the characters who live in Robledo; they are individual, real, both noble and ignoble, smart and foolish. For example, I like the way *Parable* simply loses track of people with no explanation. You see them a lot, and suddenly they're gone, with no final understanding of what happened to them. It seems to me that, in such a chaotic world, this is what would happen.

As long as it is portraying ordinary people coping in their different ways with the breakdown of society, *Parable of the Sower* feels like absolute truth. The novel is savvy about the psychology of social breakdown, how people try to live normally within the growing chaos, how normal structures persist amid attempts to compensate.

But the extent to which Butler shows order amid disorder is one of this book's problems. For instance, Lauren's father reassures his family that if anything happens to him, they will still have his insurance. Given the social breakdown that is portrayed on every page, where services are either nonexistent or function on a totally mercenary basis, where a family can't afford to call the fire department when its garage burns down because it would cost too much,

I find it hard to believe that anyone has insurance anymore, or that insurance is even a workable concept. Do people in Sarajevo still carry life insurance policies?

Robledo exists, in some ways, in a vacuum. There are no signs of popular culture. Virtually no news appears. Television, for instance, is a presence in only one house in the neighborhood, and that ends a third of the way through the book.

The implication is that somewhere beside or outside of all this chaos is an organized world. While anarchy rules on the roads, somewhere else that we never see, people live in their communities and go to their ordinary jobs. I can't help wanting to know more about where the products that fill the stores come from, about who grows the food and organizes and populates the corporations that are still functioning. Where and how do *they* live?

Yet within Robledo, *Parable* carries conviction. Here is Lauren's view of the police:

...the cops liked to solve cases by "discovering" evidence against whomever they decided must be guilty. Best to give them nothing. They never helped when people called for help. They came later, and

more often than not, made a bad situation worse.

I have no doubt that for people living in Watts, this is an accurate view of police. In *Parable of the Sower* it seems that all of America has become Watts. If that were to happen, I don't think the structures of society that support things like police departments — like taxes, state legislatures, county and city governments, elections, schools, banks, factories to produce weapons and bullets, you name it — would persist in anything like their current forms, if at all.

Lauren's life is complicated because she is cursed with empathy. When any living creature — even a dog — is killed or wounded in her presence, she feels the pain. This forces her to avoid violence because she would feel the consequences of any act she committed. It puts her in a bind when she has to use force to protect herself and others.

Each chapter and section of the book begins with a quote from Lauren's *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* as she attempts to convert the other refugees to her change-based religion. They ask some of the skeptical questions that the reader might ask, but eventually most of them come around.

The seriousness with which Butler takes *Earthseed* is one of the most difficult points of the novel. The religion begins to take over the action, as if Butler is divided between the impulses to tell a story and preach a faith. The best religion I've ever encountered in an SF book is Bokononism in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, which worked precisely because of Vonnegut's lack of piety. Bokononism was such a good joke that it might as well have been real. *Earthseed* is propounded so solemnly that I begin to wish it were a joke.

In the end I wonder how Lauren's *Earthseed* society will differ from the walled community she came from. Can her new world function independently of the society that Butler so convincingly portrays as collapsing? To be fair, she has other characters ask these same skeptical questions.

Lauren, her family, and the people she meets on the road are strong and engrossing characters even though their world seems a little sketchy. Chapter by chapter, the story is involving. *Parable of the Sower* is a sincere attempt to speak about social forces at work in the U.S. today, a cautionary tale and an exhortation to readers not to let destructive change rule their

lives. The original parable of the sower is Christ's story of the seed that falls on various kinds of ground. Some grows and prospers, some withers and dies. I gather that Octavia Butler sees her novel as a

preachment seeking that fertile ground, as much as it is a science fiction novel.

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BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

A College of Magics, by Caroline Stevermer, Tor Books, 1994, 384pp, \$22.95 Hardcover.

THERE'S something particularly beguiling about stories that take place in a neverneverland which is almost our world, but there are differences, where half of the elements we come upon are familiar, the other half patently not, yet the dividing line blurs so that the two bleed into one another. The most curious thing about such constructs is that, when they're done properly, they evoke more of our world than do stories set squarely in the fields we know.

Two novels come immediately to my mind as prime examples of the above: John Crowley's rightful classic *Little, Big* (1981) and Paul Hazel's unfortunately neglected *Winterking* (1985). Though *A College of Magics* owes no debt to either, Caroline Stevermer's new novel can easily stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those two books as a peer.

The setting is Europe in another 1900, where England and France, Italy

and the rest, all exist, yet so does the country of Aravis, the duchy of Galazon, and the oddly plain, yet ever so magical Greenlaw College where the story begins. The students of the college are considered to be witches upon graduation, but no one quite understands the appellation since they don't ever actually seem to work any magic.

It's to Greenlaw that Faris Nallaneen, the Duchess of Galazon, has been sent for three years until she comes of age. She goes unwillingly, because her conniving and ambitious uncle, regent until her twenty-first birthday, is liable to have brought her duchy to ruin before she will have the chance to claim her birthright.

No real surprises so far, in terms of what we've come to expect of fantasy, but Stevermer proves to have a gifted touch, so much so that the commonplace is quickly transformed under her hand. Her characters are so warmly drawn, that we in turn, can't help but be drawn into their lives. She writes with wit and common sense, with style and a lyric resonance that makes certain passages literally sing from the page. And the

further we read, the deeper we become engaged with the spell she has laid upon us.

From Faris' days in the college, through a sojourn in Paris and a train trip across Europe that would have done Agatha Christie proud, to the final unwindings of the plot in Faris' native Galazon and nearby Aravis, Stevermer doesn't make one misstep. The cast — in particular Faris' English friend Jane and the mysterious Tyrian — are wonderfully portrayed: some endearing and quirky, others misguided, many dangerous. The plot is like a series of Chinese puzzle boxes, only the inner boxes when brought out into the light, impossibly, prove to be larger than the ones from which they were taken.

I don't want to tell you much by way of the details of the plot, for I don't want to spoil the many surprises, both happy and hair-raising. But I will tell you that with *A College of Magic* Stevermer has fulfilled all the promise of her earlier work and that I already envy those of you who have yet to read it for the first time. To call a book an instant classic is a large hat for a novel to be forced to wear in its publishing infancy, but I don't doubt, all the same, that *A College of Magics* will endure as a favorite of discerning readers for a very long time indeed.

The Matisse Stories, by A.S. Byatt, Chatto & Windus, 1993; 135pp

Hardcover.

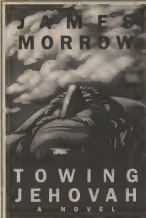
Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession* (1990) wasn't strictly fantasy — although what do you call a work that is based upon two scholars researching the letters and love affair between a famous Victorian poet and a reclusive Christina Rossetti-like author of fairy poems when both the poets and their works are imaginary? By the same token *The Matisse Stories* is not horror, or dark fantasy, yet each of its three stories deals with transformation, with what happens when the ordinary façades of their characters are peeled back to reveal the pains and wonders that lie hidden behind their everyday faces:

A woman goes temporarily mad in her hairdresser's shop when his redecorating of the premises seems to echo and mock the irrevocable changes she sees occurring in her own life.

A housecleaner for a pair of marginally successful artists becomes feted for her own heretofore-unguessed artistic talent for creating great work from found objects.

A male and female professor, discussing a disturbed student who has accused the male professor of a sexual assault and is now threatening suicide, find in each other a mirror of their own singular moments of despair and pain.

And weaving through the sto-



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ries is the common thread of Matisse's art, a ghost at first, moving peripherally through the first two stories until it takes center stage in the last one. Is art meant to comfort, or to disturb, or can it do both at the same time, depending upon what one brings to it?

Byatt dedicates her book to someone who taught her to look at things slowly. With love. And it's her careful and caring exploration of the characters in these stories that makes reading them such a transcendent experience. With interior linework by Matisse, as well as three paintings reproduced on the cover, to compliment Byatt's splendid prose, this slim volume makes for a fascinating study

of the meaning of art and the impact it has upon those who create and admire it.

The Night Inside, by Nancy Baker, Fawcett Columbine, 1994; 320pp; \$20.00 Hardcover.

After finishing Nancy Baker's *The Night Inside*, I realized that I haven't had this much fun with a vampire novel since reading *Sunglasses After Dark* by Nancy A. Collins [1989]. Both books share a certain unabashed delight in their vampire protagonists that's missing in the flood of vampire novels with which they have to share the marketplace; the difference with Baker and

Collins is that while their characters don't ignore the moral responsibility of their situation, neither author dwells on the matter ad nauseam — nor do they revel in bloody gore. Baker and Collins have stories to tell, which involve vampires to be sure, but the supernatural element is not the be-all and end-all of the narrative.

The Night Inside opens with Baker contrasting her protagonist Ardeth Alexander, a dependable and somewhat boring graduate student, with Ardeth's younger sister Sara, a musician who lives on the wild side of life in the clubland of Toronto's trendy Queen Street West. But then Ardeth is torn out of her sheltered academic life. Kidnaped, she finds herself trapped in a nightmare where her future appears to consist of dying in a pornographic snuff film, or as food for Dimitri Rosokov, a vampire who is also a prisoner of Ardeth's kidnapers.

Rosokov is obviously a monster — Ardeth gets to witness this firsthand — but not as much of a monster as their captors, and she soon realizes that her only hope for survival is to throw her lot in with Rosokov. The transformation she must undergo changes her in more ways than one — so much so that when she is later reunited with her sister Sara, the polarization of their roles becomes reversed and Ardeth has almost as much trouble recognizing herself as Sara does.

The vampires in Baker's book, like many in recent novels, are not utterly evil, or even completely amoral. Describing them in a recent interview, Baker says, "What evil comes from them comes out of the state in which they live, or the way in which they choose to live within that state." This is the real story that underlies the headlong thriller that *The Night Within* appears to be on the surface: the balance that Ardeth must strike between what she has become and the life that was once hers but to which she no longer wishes to return, even if she could.

What sets Baker's writing aside from that of the rest of the pack is the sheer polish of her craft. Her writing carries no unnecessary baggage, no endless pages of mock-Gothic "mood" or punky flash; she gets by, instead, on good, clean prose that carries the story forward without sacrificing literary values, superb characterization or that underlying resonance which renders too many other books drab.

With a debut as good as this, one can only hold one's breath in anticipation of what she'll come up with for her sophomore effort.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 8480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ¶

Rob Chilson sold his first dozen or so stories to John Campbell at Analog. Every Analog editor since then has continued to buy Rob's work, giving him the reputation of being a hard sf writer. But Rob has a gentle side as well, evidenced by his first F&SF story, "Far-Off Things" (April, 1992).

Like "Far-Off Things," "Midnight Yearnings" is an sf story that feels like fantasy. The story also explores the nature of dreams and buried treasure.

Midnight Yearnings

By Rob Chilson

HERE COMES A TIME IN every rightly constructed girl's life when she has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for buried treasure. This desire

had come upon Jan Conway in the autumn of the year. It was the third week of school, and all desire to live had departed from the scholars.

Jan dismissed with a sigh Mr. Ladysmith's discussion of the First Ship and the Founders and reverted to her dreams of treasure. A wooden chest with a round top, and she paused to wonder, why a round top? Anyway, that was traditional — a wooden chest with a round top, reinforced with iron at the corners, and locked with a "massy" padlock.

But where on all Columbia might such a thing be buried? And who was there to have buried it? Jan Conway rued her lot, born on a colonial planet which had only two events in its short history: the Settlement, and the Rebellion. And the latter had only lasted two weeks.

Something cold, but affecting her like the heat of a suddenly opened stove door, passed across Jan's face: Mr. Ladysmith's gaze. Guiltily she

brought her regard back to the room and straightened, trying to seem as if she had all along been attentive.

"You might be standing on a pleasant lea," Mr. Ladysmith said dryly. "Have glimpses that would make you less forlorn — a sight of Proteus rising from the sea, or dear old Triton blowing his horn. However — "

When he dropped her, Jan looked wonderingly about the school room. Everything she saw was so mundane as to bring a yawn to the statue of First Ship Captain Willamette.

That booklover, Chris Brinker, said, "Honor is a mere scutcheon," and looked at Mr. Ladysmith for approval.

He gave her a short look — Mr. Ladysmith didn't take even Chris Brinker for granted — and nodded. "Indeed it is, as the Second Faction was soon to learn."

Jan found herself unaccountably jealous of Chris Brinker. Mr. Ladysmith had never looked at *her* like that. She consulted her dictionary, but couldn't find "scutcheon."

Later, Mr. Ladysmith rebuked Edric Tancredi, who was boasting of his travels — he'd been to Canyonhead at Grand Rapids. "Beware you do not suffer a fall like that of Pombo the idolator," said he, "and of the other, the thief Slith." Still smarting, Jan knew she'd never find that in the dictionary either, and raised her hand.

"How do you spell 'Pombo, 'sir?'" she asked.

Mr. Ladysmith looked at her for a moment, realized that she was sincerely curious, and nodded, mostly, she saw, to himself. He spelled the word clearly and watched curiously as Jan wrote it down. So did Chris Brinker.

Next time she was on the terminal, Jan had the library search Poetry for "Pombo." No match. Worried, she broadened it to Literature in general, and it gave her a short story title: "The Injudicious Prayers of Pombo the Idolator." It was very short, so she read it on the spot. It ended with this strange Pombo feeb falling off the edge of the Earth into space, falling and falling.

Wow, thought Jan. What a weird idea.

She looked at Mr. Ladysmith. Edric was liable to fall off of Columbia? At least, fall off of the truth. Jan sighed. Impossible to understand Mr. Ladysmith. Maybe he meant both.

At last recess, Jan purposefully sought out Chris Brinker. It was almost hot out, so everybody else had left off their jackets and were running and yelling. Chris wore her jacket and huddled in the shade at one side of the school yard. When Jan approached her, Chris seemed to shrink into herself a little. She always did that; Jan had seen it ten thousand times. Now she noticed it, but she had other things on her mind.

"What does 'scutcheon' mean?" she demanded.

"It means 'nothing.'"

Jan hesitated. "You mean it doesn't mean anything?" Mr. Ladysmith had understood her, and it had meant something to him.

"No, I mean scutcheon *is* nothing. It *means* nothing, you see?" Chris was still defensive.

"Oh. Then — Honor is a mere nothing — that's what you were saying."

"Yes." Still defensive.

"Then why didn't you just up and say it?" Jan demanded, more vehement than she had meant to be. Chris got stubborn if you got pushy.

"It's from Shakespeare," Chris said stiffly.

"Oh." Jan stared at Chris, not knowing how to proceed.

After a moment Chris said, "It's from *Henry the Fourth, Part one*. I've — my parents have an audiovisual of it."

"Oh." At least she hadn't read the book, as Jan had at first feared. "Is it good?"

"Oh, yes."

Jan scuffed her toe in the dirt, at a loss, and was rescued by a yell from Philly Wu. "I gotta go!"

"Whaddayou wanta do, Jan?" Bobby Wilson asked, or demanded.

"Dig a hole," she said vaguely, thinking of treasure.

Chris Brinker laughed, to the others' irritation. Jan took no further part in the argument about what game to play. When it was settled, she played Run Sheep Run without much interest, to the exasperation of her friends.

"Pay attention, Jan!" BeBe Feder cried. "You're gettin' dumb as Chris Brinker!"

When dear old Triton rang his bells for the end of recess, it was as big a relief to Jan as to Chris. The remaining classes of the day, seeming endless, eventually ended. Jan was slow in getting out of the classroom.

BeBe Feder, Philly Wu, and Bobby Wilson ran on without her. She heard

Philly say, "Never mind that stupid Jan, she's walkin' around in a daydream." Then they were gone, their feet thunderous on the boardwalk. Jan walked home slowly, not caring, her mind far away from Port Michigan.

Might there not have been pirates in space, she asked herself, who might have chosen Columbia to hide their treasure in? The thought of pirates in space was so romantic a notion in itself that she spent the homeward trip garnering the treasure rather than digging it up, zooming through space, pouncing upon unsuspecting ships and orbital factories, terrifying everyone while laughing sinisterly and twirling her mustache.

When she got home she was immediately sent out to play, for her sister JoAnne had been forbidden to go to a picnic on Melancholy Heights with the other girls and boys from high school, and was rebelling all over the house. Momentarily Jan regretted not being older than eleven. With a sigh she took a doughnut and two cookies and departed, spurning the offer of an apple.

Phil, BeBe, and Bobby were gone when she went around to their houses. She looked for them in a shrubby cavern, a baseball field, and an abandoned shed which they frequented, without luck. Lastly, she tried the docks on Starport Bay. Resentfully she thought: they've abandoned me.

Jan stood looking out over the waters of the bay, remembering the glorious time last summer when the tramp starship *Rosa* had planeted in unexpectedly. Now the ship was long gone, and she was still stuck here on dumb old Columbia, where nothing *had* ever happened, where nothing *would* ever happen, and nothing *could* ever happen. Philly and Bobby and the other boys had talked a lot about stowing away. Now Jan wished she had.

Jan was late getting in to supper. "Jan! Where have you been?" her mother cried. "Hurry up and set the table!"

Dreamily Jan did this, and stood staring dumbly at nothing until her mother came in and started rearranging the plates and flatware, saying, "Take up the green beans, Jan, put them in the crock — Jan! I swear, if it isn't one girl it's the other —"

When the meal was served, her mother went and bullied JoAnne out of her room and to the table, where she declared, red-eyed, she wouldn't eat a bite. As Jan was also silent and their older brother absent at the Academy, it was a quiet meal, punctuated by the conversation of the dog in the next yard with an enemy two blocks down.

"I would so have been home before bedtime," JoAnne said sullenly, but

her mother declined to take the bait.

"Dad, did you ever read *Space Ranger and the Pirates!*?" Jan asked.

He looked up from concentrating on the audiocast of the news murmuring quietly over the table. "Why, no, I don't believe so. How about *Treasure Island*? I read that," he said.

Jan hadn't. She had merely seen the A/V, so she said only, "It had a big treasure." She fell to dreaming of mountains of "pieces of eight" (whatever they were) over her roast beef, and had to be reminded by her mother to eat. Absently she consumed beef, potatoes, gravy, yams, green beans, and a tomato sliced and salted.

Trouble came when she asked for dessert, and her mother told her she'd already had it. "Three cookies that I know of, and a doughnut —"

"But I didn't spoil my supper! I want dessert!"

Being somewhat well fed, Jan accepted a broad molasses cookie. Nibbling it, she stood looking about the front room for — Proteus, or Triton, or — She did not know what she wanted, but she wanted it unbearably. She pulled out a book almost at random, sighing, and lay down on the couch with it: Edgar Allen Poe illustrated by Arthur Rackham.

Jan turned immediately to the full-color illustration for "Eleonora," which depicted a young — a very young man sitting next to a younger girl, younger even than JoAnne, and nude. She had breasts, though small, and surely had her period, too. Jan sighed, and looked at the young man. He wore only a sort of shirt that came below his hips, leaving his legs bare.

Jan contemplated this picture for some time, thinking of her ideal, a high school boy named Irwin Blane, about whom she had told no one, even BeBe Feder. The near passage of her unseeing mother caused her hastily to blow the cookie crumbs out of the book and flip to the front, where she reread "The Cask of Amontillado."

"Jan! Jan, come dry JoAnne's dishes!" her mother cried.

Jan awoke with a start and went into the kitchen, where she stood drying the same plate over and over, reveling in ancient dungeons and old bones.

"You little feeb!" JoAnne cried. "Dry the other dishes too! Mom!"

"Jan, have you done your homework?" her mother asked.

"Ye-essss...."

• • •

SHADES OF the prison house have closed upon the growing girl," Mr. Ladysmith said, and Jan came back to school with a start. It was his old saying, only this time it was she they were all giggling at.

"S-sorry, sir," Jan said, too startled for caution. "My mind wandered." The class caught its collective breath at this boldness; Chris Brinker turned a mutely horrified gaze upon her. Mr. Ladysmith cocked one eyebrow at her, studied her for an embarrassing moment.

"A girl's will is the wind's will, and the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts," he said, nodding. To her relief he dropped it there, though she hadn't done her homework either.

Bobby, Philly, and BeBe were subdued at recess that day. They were all yarded for a week, because last night they had snuck off to Melancholy Heights and broken up the post-picnic post office with a barrage of ripe haws and unripe crabapples.

"Serves you right, dumb feebs," Jan said, smarting at having been left out.

"Yeah, yeah, too bad," said Bobby. "You didn't get yarded."

"So what?" she said resentfully, and didn't walk homeward with them that night either.

Instead, she read Poe and Howard Phillips Lovecraft, interrupted by dishwashing. Bullied by her mother, she also did her homework.

"No, I won't help you," said her mother for the umpteenth time. Jan was not disappointed, but it had been worth trying.

"Why don't we have graveyards on Columbia, Dad?" she asked, at bedtime.

Her father looked up from his eternal rainfall records and said, "Why, because we're a low-population frontier planet, Jan. Partly because they take up space, but mainly because we haven't the workforce to maintain cemeteries."

Boy, you couldn't have *anything* on Columbia, no pirate treasure, no ancient tombs, no dungeons — the town jail didn't even have a basement — no nothing.

Since she went to bed, listlessly, without protest, she got there almost an hour before her usual time. When she awoke, it was still well before midnight by her bedside clock.

Jan sat up. All was still, even the dogs slept. Big Moon flooded the silent world with silver light. Jan padded to the window in her gown and peered out into almost blinding light. The streetlights cast colorful green glows on trees black in the silver light. There wasn't a sound.

Jan was wide awake. She came to a decision.

Hastily throwing off her nightgown and putting on the pants, sneakers, and shirt she had cast aside that night, she raised the window. It was less silent than the door, but seemed safer. Jan opened the screen and stepped cautiously out onto the porch roof. She had done this often enough, though never at night, and made her way quickly to one of the corner posts, down it.

Jan hesitated. A truck went by a block or two over, murmured into stillness. Faint tinkly music and quiet laughter reached her from the docks tavern frequented by the small raffish element of Port Michigan society. Far off, a dog barked.

The yard gate would creak, possibly betraying her. Jan went to the corner, leaped up, caught a limb, and swung herself over the fence, which was but little higher than her waist.

It was nine blocks to the Memorial Garden, and Jan saw no one. She kept to the shady side streets, avoided street lights, and moved quickly and quietly. It must, she thought, have been some time before midnight when she reached the garden, panting more from excitement than exertion, and crept through the great stone gateway. There were no gates. The gatehouse was a ceremonial building, which in fact contained tools, flowerpots, a mortar-box, and so on; as it was never locked, she had seen within it often enough.

Never by night, however, and just now Jan did not care to look inside.

Instead she stepped into the shadows of the garden. There was a high fieldstone wall around it, overgrown with various climbing flowers, chiefly honeysuckle near the gate.

Here near the gate were the older cairns, most of them quite primitive, simply piles of rock with names and dates of birth and death carved on them. Jan supposed that these were the "rudely carved" tombstones of the elder days of Old Port Michigan. Actually, they were quite neatly done with a molly-cutter.

Farther on were the more modern and stylish cairns. These were tiny ziggurats or "hanging gardens" — Mr. Ladysmith had made a portion of Babylonian culture vivid for his students. Each of these cairns was a series

of steps walled with big blocks of stone, mostly crude amethyst or rose quartz from the Swartz Mountains, with names and dates set into them in stainless bronze or gold. The steps themselves were planted with a wide variety of flowering or decorative plants.

Not that all the "honored dead" of Port Michigan "slept here." Some people followed the custom of casting the ashes on the waters of Starport Bay south of town, and the Konopkas had always sprinkled their ashes on their flower beds. Their flowers looked the same as anybody else's.

Jan wandered through the neatly kept gardens. Fall flowers bloomed; already there was a drift of yellow leaves, burned up by too much summer before the first frost. The dew sparkled in the moonlight. Willows leaned over cairns. Dogwoods stood thoughtful. Along the wall was a row of barrel-shaped cairns commemorating First and Second Ship folk.

Jan seated herself on the lowest step of a cairn in the middle of the garden. Big Moon looked blankly down at her. Its light painted the world black and silver. A raccoon came around a cairn, saw her, froze, sniffed, froze, then whisked away at a movement. Jan felt like — like a nature sprite. She felt that she belonged here, that like the raccoon she was a part of all this. Part of the night. It was a strange, wild feeling.

The scene reminded her of the illustration in the Poe book, and Jan debated taking off her clothes. However, she was only eleven and flat-chested, and Irwin Blane wasn't here. Besides, it was chilly, now that she was sitting. The dew was quite thick; her sneakers were soaked. Somehow it wasn't as romantic as wandering around a sunlit valley with a cute boy in a short shirt. She thought of Irwin Blane in a tunic.

It came to Jan that she was not scared. This was the oldest Memorial Garden on the planet, and nearly full. Surely here, if anywhere, ghosts would linger. It wasn't a bit spooky. Less spooky than some of the side streets with their great overhanging shade trees.

Disappointed, Jan thought: haunted houses.

Traditionally, a haunted house is an empty and scary old mansion. But Port Michigan was short on mansions, empty or inhabited, scary or nonscary. In fact, she could only think of one house sufficiently romantic, with turret, gables, cupola, carved porch pillars, and gingerbread, to qualify as "haunted": the old Gareth house. It was currently inhabited by Mr. Ladysmith, his sister, and his aunt, old Miss Ling the Librarian.

Going through the Memorial Garden gateway, Jan pondered the question: did Mr. Ladysmith have a dog?

This was a part of Port Michigan she didn't know quite so well, though it wasn't far from home. Arrived at the Gareth house, she stood panting in the shadows of a stone wall overhung by tree limbs, then jumped as a dark shadow moved.

Jan put her hand on her chest and tried to catch her breath, staring big-eyed at the top of the wall. A shadow darker than the shadows of the trees moved there.

"Pfff!" it said.

Taking a deep breath, Jan stepped closer to the wall and looked up at a black tomcat. It snarled silently down at her, its eyes glowing ghastly in the tree-cavern of the night. Huge it was, and hideous. Its glaring eyes radiated hatred, its face was a seethe of old scars and new scabs, its ears were notched and ragged, one canine was gone.

"H-hi, Patticake," Jan said, breathlessly. He was old Mrs. Ping-ping Norton's "leetle Meow," the most savage and feral cat in Port Michigan, father of half the kittens and terror of half the dogs.

Patticake spat at her again in disgust and went away along the top of the wall. He vanished in the night. A sound of claws scrabbling bark told of his course into the trees, then all was still behind him.

Somewhere, a dog barked.

Jan caught her breath again and, heart hammering, went round the corner and through the gate. The Gareth house was silver-plated by the moon. Every curlicue of its rococo decoration was visible, stark against inky shadows. At one end of the house a street light poured a flood of color over a tree, brilliant green picked out with a sprinkle of yellow-edged leaves. Moths flew about the light, seeming to glow.

But what shortened Jan's breath again was the sight of a light in a window on the ground floor.

She stared at it, fascinated. It was the only lighted window she had seen on her midnight odyssey, perhaps the only one in all Port Michigan. What was he doing up at this hour? she thought indignantly, and crept across the yard under the trees toward the window. Maybe he was wakeful because of the ghosts.

But somehow ghosts now seemed a childish fancy. Jan felt that there

were even more dangerous things abroad, felt that she had brushed near to — something vast, powerful, instinct in the night. Something antithetical to that light in the window. The night itself, or the spirit of nightness.

At that moment it spoke.

"When she all alone beweeeps her outcast state, and looks her last upon the light, silent on a peak in Darien — "

Jan jumped and half-stifled a shriek.

Mr. Ladysmith stood under the trees by the wall, in deep shadow. She saw the gleam of his teeth, the dark line of his mustache above them, the twinkle from the caverns of his eyes. He stepped out slowly, wearing his white suit but not his hat.

"I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott," he said. "Unlike her, you seem to revel in them. It's the witching hour."

Jan decided that he was asking her what she was doing here. She hadn't prepared an explanation — hadn't foreseen needing one — and didn't quite know the answer, herself.

"I couldn't sleep," she said, with a touch of sullenness.

"Ah, my affliction also. The world, which seems to lie before us like a land of dreams, hath really neither — but I forebear. Still we are here, as on a darkling plain." He looked up at Big Moon, which had a halo around it. "Or a lightsome one. Why should we be here? No one has ever answered that."

Jan didn't think he was questioning her, still, with Mr. Ladysmith, you never knew. "Maybe I better go home," she said.

"There speaks the directness of youth, a reproach to the folly of age," said Mr. Ladysmith. "May I walk you home?"

Jan hadn't intended to walk, but acquiesced. Rather to her relief he was silent most of the way. The quieting of her mood allowed sleep to creep up on her. He took her hand when she stumbled. Once, the distant howl of a dog startled her.

Mr. Ladysmith squeezed her hand. "A lone dog, a wild dog," said he. "Keeping fat souls from sleep."

At her house he asked, "How are you going to get in without waking everybody?"

Any other grown-up would have insisted on waking her parents. Jan said, "Up the porch and through the window. Boost me up?"

"Of course." He lifted her lightly, she scrambled up, returned his "Good

night" quietly, and made for the window. As she opened the screen, she turned to look, and he was going out the gate. Any other grown-up would have waited to make sure she didn't fall, or something.

Next day Mr. Ladysmith seemed the same as ever; last night might have been a dream. His dry wit, the sarcasms that kept the students in check, had not altered. He was still an enigma whose reactions no one could predict. But for Jan, watching him covertly, he was a fascinating enigma.

The thing about last night that impressed her most was the walk home. All windows were dark. Nobody was awake. All the fat souls were asleep, except for her, and Mr. Ladysmith, and that distant dog who had howled.

At the study hour, she got use of the terminal. She keyed it to search Literature for a reference to "Lone Dog." "Poetry," she added as an afterthought.

It presented her with a poem about a "lean dog, a keen dog, a wild dog and lone," depicted as "keeping fat souls from sleep," and refusing to herd silly sheep.

So there it was, she thought. She looked at Mr. Ladysmith, sitting sleepily in his chair. So there we are.

He had made them read some poems about a shepherd and his girlfriend. As Jan sat looking at him, she heard the murmur of the classroom as if it were for the first time. She thought: he's lulled by the murmuring of the students in the immemorial elms.

True to the promise of the circle around Big Moon, it rained that day. They had to play in the gym at recesses. Jan and her friends effected a reconciliation, and it was as if they'd never quarreled. However, once she sat down next to Chris Brinker, who sat watching the fun forlornly.

"Did you ever read the one about Pombo?" she asked.

"Pombo?" Chris asked warily.

"You know — this Pombo feeb Mr. Ladysmith mentioned in class a couple days ago," said Jan impatiently. "I looked him up."

"No, I didn't," said Chris, eyeing her curiously. "What about it?"

"Well, it's just a real weird story," Jan said, lamely. "I really liked it. I never found Slith, though."

The rain had ended by the time school let out. She walked her friends home to the parting of the boardwalks, and then had the evening on her hands.

Acquiring two cookies, she sought the back yard of one Pete Gillooly, where was domiciled a vicious dog named Flinders. Displacing a carefully loosened board in the back fence, she crawled through and whispered hoarsely: "Flinders!"

No answer.

"Flinders!"

No answer but a canine snore. Jan knocked on the dog house.

"Flinders!"

Flinders came awake with a yawn and a creak of jaws, heard her voice, growled faintly by reflex, and came out and around the doghouse, shaking his head and grinning. Jan fed him the remaining cookie and pulled his ears while he ate it.

"Let's go dig for buried treasure," she said. Flinders was agreeable. So, hidden behind the shrubs and dog house, they reveled in the search, with but one interruption. Pete Gillooly came out to feed his dog, and Flinders had to go and be vicious while Jan lay low, not to reveal his dark secret.

After supper, Jan spent the evening in her room, drawing and not doing her homework. She drew pictures of nymphs and shepherds in idyllic settings reminiscent of Memorial Garden, a lone dog howling at Big Moon with a circle around it, and a man in white with a thin dark mustache, standing in shadow and looking down on a nude, moonlit nymph seated on a vine-covered rockpile. Jan had some talent at drawing and had done well in her classes, so these pictures were merely terrible, and they gave her great satisfaction.

THE NEXT day Mr. Ladysmith mentioned some dumb Earth politician who had cared too much about what everybody thought, and Chris Brinker seized the opportunity to hold up her hand and say, "It does not become adventurers to care who eats their bones." Mr. Ladysmith smiled on her and agreed, and she smiled in delight at Jan.

Jan, on the other hand, came in for a frown from Mr. Ladysmith. This was twice in three days that she hadn't done her homework.

"What was all that about?" she demanded scowling of Chris at lunch.

"It was about Slith," Chris said. "See, I read Pombo, and it mentioned

Slith, so I knew Slith was by the same writer — Done Zany. "The Probable Adventures of the Three Literary Men."

Jan hadn't thought of that. She seethed and pouted the rest of the day, feeling jealous, left out, put upon, and vaguely insulted by Mr. Ladysmith and Chris Brinker. At the same time, she found the pranks and simple, rugged jokes of Philly, Bobby, and even BeBe rather childish, at recess.

She was the last one out of the room, but for Mr. Ladysmith, who waited, sleepily, as she gathered up her books. Jan paused and glared at him. As she had expected, he had a letter for her parents.

Accepting it, she demanded, "Why don't you sleep at night?"

Mr. Ladysmith blinked, smiled faintly. "I am cohabiting with the Muse, and am become a brother to dragons and a companion to owls."

Darn him, anyway! Jan took a deep breath, expelled it in disgust, and stomped out, with a final searing glance over-shoulder.

It was Friday, and there was much hope among her friends that the yarding would be ended with the weekend, but no parent had given word yet. Jan tried to join in, but found she didn't much care.

She saw Chris Brinker walking by herself, her head down and her silky hair half-concealing her face, kicking at the loose boards of the boardwalk. Wonder what that feeb is doing tonight, Jan thought. Prob'ly nothing. Just reading. She never got letters.

Jan moved restlessly and irritably around the house till after supper, waiting for the shoe to fall. She was careful to do her homework and dry dishes without being told, but it was with the conviction that nothing would help. Again she found herself drifting off into daydreams. Not till after the dishes were done did Jan's mother quietly ask her to step up to her bedroom.

She opened a Bible and took out the pictures Jan had drawn.

The most damning one, the one with her nude self and Mr. Ladysmith looking down, was on top. Jan's heart stopped, started up again with a thud that shook her chest.

"Jan, I don't know what's wrong with you. For days now you've been doing your chores badly, and now I find you haven't been doing your homework. You're like a sleepwalker. I have to call your name three times to get your attention. I swear you're as bad as JoAnne, and not even a teenager yet...."

Jan didn't look up, as Mom went on in her usual way. How could she not

see that that was a picture of Jan and Mr. Ladysmith? It was so obvious, the suit, the mustache, and herself — And the scantily clad nymphs, couldn't she see that they were all Jan, too?

"Well, one thing's for sure. You're to do no more drawing in the evenings, young lady, till you can show me that you've done your homework. Afterward you can draw all you like...."

"Yes, Mom," she said, head hanging but heart beating furiously in relief.

"But if you don't straighten up and fly right, my girl, we'll have no more drawing at all. Remember that!"

"Yes, Mom."

Yes, yes, yes, I know, I know! Jan ran down the hall to her room and flung herself on the bed. The tears were already coming. Butting her head into her pillow, Jan wept extravagantly.

Not draw again? How could her mother even hint at it? They were pictures of someplace a long, long way away from here. Someplace Jan knew she would never see. She would spend the rest of her life on Columbia, among people like her mother who didn't understand.

Jan raised her head at that thought and without wiping her tears looked around the room. A blind unreasoning panic, a feeling of being trapped, seized her and she jumped up and rushed around the room in a frenzy, knocking her dolls off the dresser, kicking the beanbag footstool across the room, upsetting the wastebasket, sweeping all the bedclothes off the bed. She finished by running at the door and banging her head against it, as she had done when a child.

"It's all right," she heard her mother say, evidently to her alarmed father, as she sat amid stars on the floor. "She'll be all right in the morning."

The blow calmed her, but Jan knew that she was far from being all right. In a further excess of deep, desperate weeping, she flung herself onto the bed again, groped for the displaced pillow, and buried her head in it.

She awoke sometime before midnight, chilled, groped for the covers, then remembered and came fully awake. The house was silent, and Port Michigan also. Jan wrapped a blanket around herself and stared out the window. Big Moon was less round than it had been two nights ago, but was still very bright and alluring.

Her mother was wrong. Jan knew she was forever changed; she would never be "all right." Never be a fat soul, sleeping in the night.

And nobody, nobody, nobody would ever understand her.

Then she remembered. Maybe —

It wasn't yet midnight. Jan dropped the blanket, opened the window cautiously, then retreated and got her jacket. Outside, across the roof, and down. Again she swung over the fence rather than use the gate. Moving rapidly through the night, Jan felt that she was in her element, that she belonged here. A kind of wild joy surged within her, and when a distant dog howled, she felt like howling back at him and waking a few fat souls. I wonder if Chris Brinker is awake, she thought.

Finally she came to the old Gareth house, and crept through the gate with her heart beating fast. And the window was lit.

With a great though unconscious sigh of relief, Jan looked around the yard and was surprised not to see Mr. Ladysmith. Motion within the window attracted her, and she crept across the yard.

He was *studying*.

Jan was too disappointed to think. He was working away at a computer, and he had two or three books open and unopen around him, and there was a typewriter and a clipboard, and a bunch of notes stuck to a weak-valence board. Studying.

Brother to dragons, companion to owls, for *that*?

Angry, Jan hit the window with her fist, and was gratified to see him jump; a computer stylus went flying. Mr. Ladysmith turned an astonished gaze on her. It was a moment or two before he recovered.

Crossing, he opened the window and copied her attitude: elbows on the sill, chin on fists, his nose pointing down at her nose pointing angrily up. He smiled faintly instead of scowling.

"'Twas even, and the mome raths outgrabe. They'd lost their way home, you see."

"How come you can't sleep?" she demanded irritably, dismissing his nonsense.

Mr. Ladysmith offered his hand. "Come in and I'll show you."

That's practically the first time he's ever come right out and said what he means, Jan thought, clambering through the window.

He stood in the midst of all his labors and waved his arm. "I'm writing a book," he said.

Jan scowled. "So?"

Mr. Ladysmith turned to her, smiled. "Not like your father's books, nothing practical or sensible. Fiction. Literature, I hope."

Her father called his books theses on weather and climate, and they were unutterably boring. Fiction? Jan thought. "Can I see?"

"You may."

Suspended in space within the computer's viewplate she saw: *all crude and distorted philosophies, this was, he thought, the worst. If suffering has no purpose, it can have no value. "I do not consider that true religion," he said mildly. But he saw, with a pang, that she did not understand. She recoiled in shock.*

"Wow," Jan said. Mom would recoil in shock like that. "I didn't know there was a real live author on all of Columbia, except like Dad."

"Oh, there are a number, mostly men and women with leisure. They write very mild milk-and-water romances, either set on Columbia, or on some never-never-land in space just like Columbia but even sappier."

Jan nodded. "Clover for fat souls."

Startled, his eyebrows moved. "Quite so."

Jan sat down and stared at him. Mr. Ladysmith sat down also and stared back, patient, friendly. Jan didn't speak for a long time, working it out. "Wow," she said at last. "You can go anywhere, be anybody, have all kinds of adventures."

"And be home for dinner," he said, nodding. "Nasty, uncomfortable things, adventures. And you?"

"Me, what?"

"Do you also want to escape from Columbia and the dolts that dwell therein?" He reached out and gently touched her cheek, and Jan remembered she'd been crying, felt the dried tears. But she was in no wise embarrassed. She looked steadily back at him.

"Well...."

"This past week, I thought it seemed that, oh, you didn't quite know what it was you *did* want, but that your heart fairly ached, you wanted it so."

"Well, yes. But I don't know about writing."

"Drawing, perhaps. Art. You do well in that class."

"No," she said instantly. Then: "Maybe." The years and the kilometers seemed to stretch before her to the end of time. Places to go, things to see, and all within herself. It was like stowing away on a starship, only she *knew*

all the places she would see would be magic. "And maybe I'll try writing. I like to read. — Not clover," she added hastily.

"No, not clover. Well, lass, Columbia has need for us, though it won't like us much." He grinned at her, like Bobby Wilson getting ready to duck her.

Jan grinned back and wriggled all over like Flinders. But in her mind she was Patticake. "Can I read your book?"

"Well, it isn't finished, of course. But there's a hard copy on the desk, you may at least begin to read it."

Jan took it over to the window. There was a wall light there, and pleasantly cool air swirled in. The printscript was titled *Long Ago and Far Away*. It started in the middle, with a man arguing with his mother about what the neighbors might think. She read only three pages, with mounting joy, before she had to stop, thinking. Someday I'll be doing something like this. Writing or drawing or something. Maybe everything. You hear me, Chris? Well, listen to this.

She stuck her head out the window, looked up at Big Moon, and howled loud enough to wake all the fat souls for miles around. Behind her, Mr. Ladysmith chuckled as he, too, in his way, howled.



Juleen Brantingham made her last appearance in F&SF in May, 1985. She returns with "Old Freedom," a delightful story about loneliness and love and the future.

Old Freedom

By Juleen Brantingham

WHEN THE CALL CAME, whoever it came from, however it came, it was as sudden and undeniable as the Enhancement, and nobody has ever been

able to explain that.

I was in the back yard chopping wood, enjoying the fresh air and the exercise and the pleasure of my independence from gas companies and electric companies and every other system that's been set up to spare us physical labor. Freedom was dozing on the porch, one ear cocked in case I chopped off my foot and he had to call a medbot.

Old Free had been a snarling, feral pup when I found him, years before the Enhancement, most likely one of a litter born to a mother abandoned when one of my gone-away neighbors found VR better than the real thing. I used to see a lot of that before the Enhancement, people staying longer and longer in a place that's no more real than a dream, leaving their dogs to fend for themselves, poodles and Yorkies and dachshunds who have no more idea how to kill their own food than a silkworm has how to knit a pair of boxer

shorts. Most of the dogs died off in the first few years. After the Enhancement, of course, abandoning one would be like cutting off your own arm, leaving it twitching on the floor and trying to crawl after you.

Freedom wasn't one of those toy breeds I despised; he wasn't one of the bigger ones like setters or Afghans that had been bred for looks and wound up stupid as stumps as a consequence. He was part Rottweiler and part Chow, I've always thought, with maybe some Lab thrown in for seasoning. He wasn't pretty but I sometimes thought he was smarter than I was. Tough as old shoe leather. He had to be, to survive on his own as long as he did. It hadn't been easy to win his trust. I've got scars halfway up both arms to prove it. I won't let the medbot remove them because they're a badge of honor.

Since the Enhancement we'd been like Siamese twins joined at the heart. He ate what I ate — or more often, I ate what he ate, because he was the better hunter, though I never could develop a taste for raw meat. We did everything together.

I couldn't believe it when old Free sat up, scratched at a flea, hopped down from the porch and said "Nice knowing you, man. Got to go now."

I dropped the axe, damn near lopping off a couple of toes. "Go? Go where? What the hell?"

He didn't answer, just started trotting down the road. Naturally I followed him. Joined at the heart, like I said. What else could I do?

"What is it, Free? You smell a rabbit out there?" I knew it wasn't that; he always told me when he was after a rabbit or a feral cat or a skunk; sometimes he'd even let me talk him out of it. "Is there a bitch come into season?" But it couldn't be that either; Free wasn't shy about his needs.

He shook his head and kept on trotting like there was a string tied to his nose, pulling him along.

Last time Free had gone off by himself, three years before, he'd fallen down the cellar hole of an abandoned house, broke his leg and couldn't get out. I'd never have found him if it wasn't for the Enhancement. I was never sure how far that link could reach and I'd never dared test it.

Since the accident Free had stayed pretty close to me. He was only ten and with help from the medbots I figured he'd outlive me.

I decided a long time ago that when my time came I'd go out in the wilds where the medbots couldn't find me and hook me up to life-support and the VR world, like it or not. (And I wouldn't: people say it's realer than real but

how can your mind and your soul be alive when your body is lying in a dark room, never moving, never smelling the fresh air, never feeling the sun on your skin, never...But you get the idea. By now you've decided I'm a crank who just doesn't understand and I'm proud to say you're right.) We'd never talked about it but I thought Free would want to go with me.

"You're not sick, are you?" I said, feeling half sick myself at the thought. "Wait. Let me call a medbot. Wait up! I said, wait up for me, you damned fleabag."

I could tell by looking that Free wasn't sick. The way he was moving along it was like he was getting younger and livelier with each step.

Finally he condescended to answer me. "Not sick," he said, grinning, his tongue hanging out. "Going away. Chasing and bitches and wild smells and rolling in the grass forever and hot meat and no pain and no dying."

I suspected then it wasn't just Free, that it was all dogs everywhere, like the Enhancement. It scared me because if it was something big like that, not just a sudden fit on Free's part, then there was nothing I could do.

I trailed Freedom down one street after another, past empty windows and the jungles that have grown up around the houses. I don't know which spooks me more, thinking of the people, my former neighbors, lying in their beds with wires hooked to their skulls like they were being sucked dry by electronic vampires or thinking of the 'bots they run with their minds, doing the jobs they used to do their own selves. Living by proxy, that's what it amounts to. Knowing every time I run up against one of those 'bots, the systems, farms and factories and right down to the delivery 'bots and the people-tenders — knowing there's a mind hooked up to it that's giving no more real thought to what it's doing than my own mind gives to the gushing blood in my arteries or the working of the muscles in my arms and legs.

I got to shivering and stumbling because if Free left me, what could I do but hook myself up to that system I hate and despise or shoot myself? Free was the only living soul in all the world I gave a damn about.

I followed him for about half a day. I begged him to stop, to come home with me; I made wild promises; I crawled after him on my knees for a while. Didn't make any difference. He kept going, ripping my heart out and carrying it off somewhere.

"If you ever loved me you couldn't leave me this way. That's it, isn't it? You never really loved me. You were faking it all along, just taking

advantage of me."

"Chasing and bitches and wild smells..." he says, more like he was thinking to himself than answering. Then he turned his head and looked at me for the first time since he'd hopped down from the porch. "Man, if you loved me you'd understand."

Well, I *could* understand, sort of. For a dog, living in a house with a human must be something like a human living in the VR world. Everything important might be there, but with no substance to it, nothing any healthy red-blooded dog could sink his teeth into. But how could he leave me? I understood his needs. I'd tried to make sure my kind of life didn't fence him in too much.

"If it's that good where you're going, I'm going with you."

He shook his head again, never slowing for a second. "Can't be," he said.

That was the end of that. My eyes were burning but I wouldn't give up. I tried to convince myself old Free had had a stroke or something and sooner or later he'd come to his senses and I'd have to carry him home. His leg, you know. It had never been as strong since the time he broke it. I tried but I couldn't make myself believe it, especially after I started glimpsing people on the streets to either side of me and slipping through the jungles, all going the same direction. The dogs were harder to see but I knew they were there from the way the people were weeping and wailing like they had no pride, no pride at all.

Pride can be some comfort when you've got nothing else left. Freedom might be ripping the living heart out of me but I wasn't about to shame myself in front of anybody else.

Some comfort.

We started passing apartment blocks and office buildings, coming to the center of the city, what used to be the old town square, which had been turned into a park. It was badly overgrown, of course, except for the old baseball diamond where the jungle hadn't yet gotten a good grip. There were so many people I felt like my skin was going to itch me to death, my stomach was churning pure acid. I hadn't spoken to another live human soul in twenty years and I wasn't about to start again, not after the ones I'd loved had one by one opted for VR and abandoned me. But I'd have followed Free through the gates of Hell if I had to.

We were near the edge of the diamond when I saw this — this *thing*

hanging out over the pitcher's mound. Don't know how to describe it except to say it looked like a heap of intestines and some kind of lab equipment all folded together; it was churning and misty, purple as a bruise, hanging close to the ground.

One by one, the dogs were going up to it, taking a hop and getting caught up in the folds. Then they'd disappear.

The noise was incredible: screams and wails and I don't know what-all, the sound battering at me and making me want to hunch down. Free felt it, too; his ears were pressed close to his head but he never slowed down. People were throwing themselves on the ground, clutching at their dogs' legs. A few tried to hop into the thing themselves but they were tossed back like they'd been bounced from a trampoline.

Freedom stopped. "Got to go now," he said with a sad look. "Good knowing you, man. Don't forget me."

Then he jumped, sailing over the heads of a couple of smaller dogs. He looked as happy as a pup.

My eyes were burning so bad I thought they'd turn to cinders right there in my skull. But if it killed me, I wouldn't let a tear fall. I lifted my hand, hoping he could still see me somehow. "Good chasing, Free. Be happy. Wherever you're going, you be happy, dammit."

When your heart's been ripped out of you, you bleed but you don't weep.

I turned away, my body on automatic. Wasn't thinking about where I'd go or what I'd do. I was just one big ache. I didn't look at the others who were going through what I'd just gone through but I could see them out of the corners of my eyes: men and boys and women and girls. I never would have guessed there were so many still in this world, still with enough heart to live with a dog and share his life. There wasn't any point in talking to them. They couldn't help me and I couldn't help them.

I veered off to get past the crowd that had built up behind me, detoured around an old live-oak with branches that rested on the ground like elbows. On the other side I saw something that turned my stomach so bad I thought I'd vomit. It was a natural man like me, not a robot, some sort of peddler, though right up to that minute I hadn't known there still was such a thing. God knows where he came from or where he got the things he had or how he'd known there'd be a demand for them. He had a trundle truck full of stiff, furry objects about the size of Free when he was a pup. People were coming up to

him and sticking their fingers in the credit slot of the truck and he'd take one of these objects and plonk it in their arms. It would begin to wiggle and squirm and make yipping noises and lap at the face of whoever was holding it.

Fake dogs. The man was selling fake dogs.

I thought of all the stupidities I'd seen in my life, this was a new low.

The people who got them were laughing and carrying on as hard as they'd been weeping a few minutes before, tear stains still on their faces. How could they do it, I wondered. The dogs had been made out of wire and chemicals and 'puter chips. How could a living, breathing, caring human being settle for a fake dog once they'd known the love and trustingness of the real thing? I thought, maybe the people are fakes too, and I shook my head and turned away.

Before I got more than a couple steps I started hearing this growling noise in the branches over my head. I stopped to try to figure out what it was and just then something darted along the branch next to me like a monkey. It jumped on the peddler, knocking him down. It was a boy, a tad with yellow hair and bare feet and rags for clothes. His growl turned into a scream and he was dancing and flinging himself around and waving his arms. First thing you know he'd upset the trundle truck and spilled out the fake dogs and he was stomping on them, stomping them to shit.

I laughed to beat hell.

The other people, though, they didn't like it much. The ones who already had their fakes clutched them tighter and ran away. The ones who hadn't gotten theirs yet began to chase after the boy and try to stop him. They had a hard time getting their hands on him, he was so quick, but there was so many of them that he never had a chance. As quick as that the show was over. Someone started yelling for the copbots.

To tell the truth, I don't know what got into me. The boy wasn't anything to me. Maybe it was the thought of him being dragged into a dark room and hooked up to the electronic vampire and "reeducated" to take his "proper" place in the VR world. Maybe it was because I was just so damned mad about losing Freedom. Maybe I just wanted to hurt somebody. I plowed into that crowd, yelling and stomping on the fakes the boy had missed. They squished and crackled and crunched under my shoes. Then the peddler and his customers were yelling and grabbing at me; they ripped my shirt, knocked off one of my shoes, and punched me. I was laughing fit to bust a gut. Oh be joyful!

In the confusion I saw the boy slip loose.

I took a few swings at the people who were in my way, just from general cussedness, crunched my knuckles on somebody's skull, but managed to cause enough confusion that I broke away. I ran after the boy and caught his hand and dragged him along with me. Old Free had once shown me a place where the brush looks thick but there's a path through the worst parts. We ran for all we were worth, that angry mob screaming at our heels, both of us laughing so hard we were almost pissing ourselves. In spite of that we lost the mob in the jungle.

When the stitch in my side got so bad I couldn't take another step, I collapsed in a little glade floored by a cracked concrete slab and ringed by elderberry bushes. The boy fell down beside me, rolling around laughing and holding his sides.

"Kah-crunch, squish!" I choked out, still roaring.

We laughed some more and then a little more and then the laughter sort of trickled away. The boy was so close I could smell his sweat, see the dirt ground into his pores and the ribs sticking through the tatters of his shirt. No way of telling whether he was one of the ones abandoned and forgotten when his folks found the VR world more interesting than the real one or whether he was like me, seeing what was happening and just deciding to go off on his own.

Not that it mattered. He wasn't anything to me.

I edged one way and the boy edged the other, both of us looking at each other slantwise. It had been twenty years since I'd been that close to another human soul and that experience hadn't been the kind to make me comfortable with this one.

"Guess I better be getting home," I said, feeling sadness settle as heavy as if that concrete slab had tipped up and fallen down on top of me.

Getting up, I accidentally lurched in the boy's direction. His eyes got wide and he drew back, lifting his lip in a snarl like old Free had given me the first time I saw him.

Old Free.

Freedom, my other half.

Gone.

Forever.

After a while I felt this touch on my shoulder. I couldn't make myself

look up but I could smell the boy's breath, sour like he'd had nothing but grass to eat.

"Mister," he said, all choked up. "Mister, don't think I want to be friends or nothing, but I'd like to tell you about my dog. His name is Sam. He's the best old dog..."

Before you know it, the two of us were crying on each other's shoulders and laughing between the sobs and talking about Sam and Freedom and where they might be, with chasing and bitches and wild smells and rolling in the grass forever.



"WHAT I DO IS CHANNEL THE SPIRITS
OF YOUR DEPARTED PETS."

Dale Bailey's story, "Touched," from our October/November, 1993 issue will appear in *The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction*, to be published by St. Martin's Press this fall. He has also sold stories to *Amazing Stories* and to *Pulphouse*. He is currently at work on a novel.

"*Giants in the Earth*" was originally suggested by a verse in the Book of Genesis. "Apparently many of the church fathers believed that the passage referred to angels who had fallen in love with 'the daughters of men' and fathered children by them," Dale writes. "I couldn't help but wonder what happened to those beings, and the story was written partly as a response to that question."

Giants in the Earth

By Dale Bailey

BURNS DIDN'T IMAGINE HE could ever bring himself to really like Moore, but as he watched the man work the auger in the flickering shaft of his cap

light, he had to admit a kind of grudging admiration for the fellow's grace. Down here in the mines, you noticed such things, for a clumsy man could kill you. It was just Moore's piety that bothered Burns; he had a way of preaching at a man.

Now, Moore swung back from the wall, nodding, a thin gaunt-featured man with lips pinched for want of living. The breast auger extended from his chest like a spear, it gleamed dully beyond a glittery haze of coal dust. Burns stepped forward, tamped a charge into the hole, plugged it with a dummy, and turned around to look for Moore, but the other man had already retreated through the blackness into the heading shaft. An empty cart stood on fresh-laid track, waiting to be filled, but otherwise the room was empty. Somewhere a miner hollered musically, and the sound chased itself through the darkness. There was a stink of metal and sweat, and the rattle of dust in his

lungs. He could feel that old dread tighten through his chest.

Damn Blankenship for not wetting down the walls, he thought. Tight-fisted sonofabitch.

And then, with a guttural sigh for the way life had of creeping up on a man — first a wife, and then a baby, and then you were trapped, there was nothing to do but work the coal — Burns turned back to the wall. He struck a match and touched it to the fuse. The fuse sputtered uncertainly, and for a moment Burns thought it might be bad, and then it caught with a hiss that seemed thunderous. It flared a self-devouring cherry, and Burns spun away, squeezing the match between his fingers as he stumbled from the room and flattened himself against the wall in the main shaft.

The charge went up with a muffled thud, and he braced himself for a second, more-powerful explosion that did not come. The dust had not ignited. He heard the wall crumble, tumbling Blankenship's coal out of the seam, and a thick cloud mushroomed into the main shaft. Burns glanced over at Moore. In the glare of the cap light, the other man's face looked pale and washed out, his eyes like glinting sapphire chips set far back in bony hollows.

Moore smiled thinly and lifted the auger over his head. "The Lord's with us."

"Lucky, I reckon," Burns said. He hunkered down, dug through the tool poke, and hefted his shovel and axe. "Reckon we ought to get to it," he said.

Burns stood and ducked back into the room without waiting for Moore to follow. Coughing thick dust, he picked his way through the rubble to the chest-high hole the charge had gouged in the wall. He dropped the shovel and went to his knees to prop the axe against the sloping roof of the undercut and that was when he saw it.

Or, rather, didn't see what he expected to see — what he had seen maybe a thousand times or more in the year since he and Rona had married, the baby had been born, and he had taken to working as a loader in Blankenship Coal's number six hole. What he didn't see was the splash of his cap light against the wall, pitted by the charge he had rigged to loosen the seam. Instead, the beam probed out in a widening cone that dissipated into dust and swirling emptiness.

A black current of stale air swept out at him, and Burns quickly crab-walked backwards. He jarred the prop loose, and the heavy tongue of rock above him groaned deep within itself. Pebbles sifted down, rattling against his

hardhat, and then the mountain lapsed into silence. When the callused hands closed about his upper arms, Burns nearly screamed.

"Goddammit," he snapped, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

He spun around to face Moore, and the other man backed away, flattened palms extended before him. Moore looked like a vaudeville comic in black-face. Coal dust streaked his gaunt features, was tattooed into the very fabric of his flesh, and it would never wash away, not even with years of scrubbing. You could tell the old-timers by the dusky tone of their complexions. Burns knew that if Moore would strip away his shirt, the exposed flesh of his face and hands would meet the pale skin beyond in hard geometric planes.

He knew, too, that someday he also would look as if he wore perpetually a dusky mask and gloves, and he hated it. But there was Rona and the baby. Swirling in the veil of dust that hung between the two men, Burns could almost see them, their features etched with a beauty too real and fragile for life in these mountains. A year ago, he had not known that a man could feel this way, and sometimes still it crept up on him unawares, this love that had led him to this deep place far beneath the earth.

He glanced away before Moore saw his eyes throw back the dazzle of the cap light. "Get that light out of my eyes, you've about half-blinded me," he said, and he turned away to collect himself. The massive tongue of rock that projected over the hole seemed almost to mock him. So close, Burns thought, and then where would Rona and the baby have been?

"You okay?" Moore asked.

Burns looked up. "Hell," he said. "Sorry. I thought the rock was coming down on me."

Moore gave him a curt nod, bent to re-set the fallen prop, and then wedged his own axe into the gap. "That ought to hold it," he said, extending a hand to Burns.

Burns took the hand, and lifted himself to his feet. He dusted off his clothes out of habit, not because it would do any good. "There's something else," he said.

"What's that?"

"Something ain't right. That hole don't stop. It just keeps on going."

Moore lifted an eyebrow and studied the undercut for a moment. "Well, let's have a look," he said. "I don't reckon there's anything to be afraid of." He hunkered down, slid into the gap, and vanished.

Examining these last words for some taint of suggested cowardice, Burns followed. The roof slanted down a bit and then disappeared entirely as he emerged into a larger darkness. Though he could not immediately see the space, some quality — the acoustics of a far-away water drip or perhaps the flat, dank taste of the air — told him that it was at least as large as the room he and Moore had been working, that it had been sealed beneath the mountain for long years.

Burns stood. His light stabbed into the dark. "Moore?" Abruptly, he became aware of a sound like muffled sobs. "Moore? What happened to your light?"

"I turned it off."

Burns turned to face the voice. Moore sat just beyond the darker mouth of the opening into the other room, his arms draped over drawn-up knees, his head slumped. When he looked up at Burns, the sapphire chips of his eyes were shiny with a kind of madness. Tears glittered like tiny diamonds on his dusky face, and Burns could see the clean tracks they had carved across his cheeks.

The room seemed to wheel about him for a moment, the gloom to press closer. Uneasiness knotted his guts.

"Why'd you turn off your light?"

"Giants in the earth," Moore whispered. "There were giants in the earth in those days."

"What are you talking about? Why did you turn off your light?"

Moore gestured with one hand toward the darkness farther into the room, and Burns felt ice creep out of his belly and begin the paralyzing ascent into his throat. Almost a year ago, just a month or so after Burns had started to work, a spark from somebody's axe had ignited the dust in the number three hole. The men who survived the explosion came out of the mine with faces smoothed over by experience; the unique lines time and character had carved into their features had all at once been erased. They had no more individuality than babies, fresh from an earthen womb, and it occurred to Burns that Moore looked just that way now.

Burns did not want to look into the darkness at the center of the room. He liked his face. He did not want it to change. And yet he knew that if he did not move or speak, did not take action, the ice that was creeping slowly into his throat would fill up his mouth and paralyze him. He would be forever

unable to move beyond this time and place, this moment.

He looked into the room.

In the flickering shaft of his cap light there lay a creature of such simple and inevitable beauty that Burns knew that for him the significance of that concept had been forever altered; it could never again be applied to mere human loveliness. Burns felt as if he had been swept up in a current of swift-running water, and in the grip of that current, he took a step forward, stunned by the apprehension of such beauty, unadulterated by any trace of pettiness, or ugliness, or mere humanity. He thought his heart might burst free of his chest. He had not known such creatures existed in the world.

And then, through that veil of terrible beauty, there penetrated to him the particular details of what he had seen; he came abruptly to a stop as that paralyzing ice of awe and fear at last rose into his mouth.

This is what he saw:

A being, like a man, but different, ten feet long, or twelve feet, curled naked in the heart of the mountain.

Wings, white rapturous wings, that swept up and around it like a cloak of molten feathers.

And in its breast, the rhythmic pulse of life.

Giants in the earth, he thought, and then — because he knew that if he did not look away, the lines of his face would be erased and he would lose forever some essential part of himself — Burns turned to look at Moore, who still sat against the wall. His gaunt face hung slack; tears glistened on his cheeks.

"I couldn't bear it," he said.

"We have to tell someone," Burns said.

"But who?"

"Someone who can do something."

"Who?"

Burns thought furiously. For a moment he thought he heard the rustle of feathers in the darkness behind him, and half-fearful, he turned to face the creature, but it had not moved. They could not be responsible for this, Burns thought — and the word responsible was like a gift, for suddenly he knew.

He crossed the room, crouched by Moore, and peered into his face. The slap sounded like a pistol shot in the enclosed chamber. Burns drew back his stinging palm for another blow, but he saw it wasn't necessary, for the

madness in Moore's eyes had retreated a little.

"Get the cashier," he said. "Get Holland." He reached out and snapped Moore's cap alight, saw the man's gaunt features tighten with wonder. "Go on, now," he said. "Not a word to anyone but Holland, hear?"

Moore stood without speaking and ducked through the undercut. Burns was alone. Once again, he remembered the miners, their faces smoothed by experience, as they emerged from the explosion-shattered heading of the number three hole. And as he turned away from the undercut to look yet again at the awful beauty that lay slumberous in the center of the room, a terrible vision fractured his thought: his own face, smooth and featureless as a peeled egg.

In the wavering beam from his cap, Burns caught a single glimpse of the creature —

— *the giant, the angel* —

— and then he reached up with trembling fingers and shut off the light. In the succeeding blackness, sounds were magnified. The far-away drip of water became an intermittent clash of cymbals punctuated by measureless silences in which the creature's labored respiration sounded clamorous as a great bellows stoking the furnaces of the earth.

Finally, not because he dared to smoke, but because he had to do something with his hands or go mad, Burns fumbled for tobacco and rolling papers and began to make a cigarette. Even in the darkness, his fingers fell without hesitation into the familiar rhythm of the process, and the prosaic nature of the task — here in the midst of wonders — enabled him to envision Moore as he made the long trek through the heading shaft to the surface. He imagined the annoyed glance Jeremiah Holland would direct at Moore when he stepped into the cashier's shack, could almost see the thoughtful look that would replace it when he heard what Moore had to say. Holland, Burns knew, was a thoughtful man, the kind of man who considered the angles of a thing, and could work them to his own advantage.

Burns licked the paper, twisted the cigarette into a cylinder, and slipped it into his mouth. The tobacco tasted sweet against his lips. Holland would be a good friend to have, he thought. Holland could help a man.

And yet...

He felt a flicker of doubt. Such beauty...

The sound of men crawling through the undercut came to him. A

wavering light illuminated the chamber, and Burns's heart broke loose within him as he caught a glimpse of the creature, curled fetal on the stone floor. The light bobbed into the air, and he saw that it was Moore. A second ghostly shaft penetrated the darkness, and Burns heard a metallic rattle of tools. He stood, his fingers fumbling at his cap as he stepped forward to meet Holland.

The cashier emerged from the undercut and pushed himself erect, a thin, wiry man with a battered toolbox clutched in one hand. His lean face looked hollow, even skeletal, in the intersecting beams of the cap lights, and his dark eyes returned Burns's gaze from deeply recessed sockets.

"I hope you're not planning to light that thing," he said.

Burns plucked the cigarette from his mouth with shaking fingers. "I just had to do something with my hands. That thing —" Licking a moist fragment of tobacco from his lips, he slipped the cigarette into his shirt pocket.

Holland lowered the toolbox to the floor with a clatter. "Yes, that thing. Your friend wasn't very articulate about that...thing." He glanced ruefully at his clothing, store-bought linen several grades more expensive than the cheap flannel the miners wore, and Burns saw that the cloth was soiled with dark streaks of coal dust. "Where is it?"

Burns glanced at Moore, but the other man had retreated deep into himself.

"It's over there," Burns said. Almost unwillingly, he turned his head and impaled the creature on the flickering shaft of his cap light. Its breast kindled with life; wings stirred in the passing wind of a dream. Burns blinked back tears. It seemed as if each particle of the air had suddenly flared with radiance, and though in fact it did not diminish at all, Burns imagined that the darkness retreated a little.

Jeremiah Holland drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

"I thought you ought to see it," Burns said. "I wanted to do the right thing. I got a wife and baby and I was hoping —" He stopped abruptly when he realized that Holland wasn't listening.

The cashier's face had gone very white, and as Burns looked on, the tip of his tongue crept out and eased over his lips. He turned to look at Burns through widened eyes. "Have either of you touched it?"

Burns shook his head.

The cashier crouched by the toolbox, threw back the latches with

trembling fingers, and withdrew a tamping bar. He stood, clutching the bar in one white-knuckled hand, and looked from Burns to Moore, who stood a few feet away, his face looking new-minted. "Let's see if you can wake it up," he told Burns.

Burns hesitated, and Holland lifted the tamping bar a little. "Goon now."

His heart hammering, Burns began to creep across the room. That paralyzing ice once again edged into his throat. Blood pounded at his temples. He felt as if he had been wrapped in a thick suffocating layer of wool.

And then he was there, standing over the —

— *giant, the angel.*

The creature, he told himself.

"Careful," Holland whispered, and glancing over his shoulder, Burns saw the flesh beneath the cashier's right eye twitch. "Do you realize — " he said, " — have you any idea what we could do with this thing?" He laughed, a quick harsh detonation, abrasive as shattering glass, and brandished the tamping bar. "Go on now."

Burns felt breath catch in his throat. He tried to speak, to protest, but that paralyzing ice had frozen away his voice. Swallowing, he prodded the creature with his boot. Flesh gave, the thing shifted in its age-long sleep: a hush and sigh of wings in the enveloping dark, the rusty flex of ancient muscles, and all at once the creature lay prone, face turned away, arms outstretched, great wings flared across the dusty floor. Conflicting impressions of promethean strength and gentleness swept through Burns, and — like nothing he had felt before — a swift and terrible hunger for such beauty, ethereal and mysterious.

Not until it passed did Burns realize he had been holding his breath. He released it and drew in a great draught of stale air. The ice had retreated a bit. Strangling a gout of hysterical laughter, he turned away.

"Maybe it's hibernating," he said, abruptly reminded of something he had heard at Rona's church — a story of an epoch impossibly distant, when graves would vomit forth the dead. Would angels ascend from the womb of the shattered planet?

Holland had returned to the toolbox. "We can't let it get away."

"Get away?"

Holland stood, his angular features ashen, and extended in his left hand the shining length of a hacksaw. The serrated blade threw off radiant sparks in the shifting luminescence of the cap lights. A sickening abyss

opened inside of Burns.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Burns started to say, but he let the last word trail away, for he saw that a kind of lethargic energy had animated Moore's features. With the languor of drifting continents, half-formed expressions passed across the experience-scrubbed surface of his face.

"No," Moore whispered. "Please...please don't."

Holland spared him a single dismissive glance, and then he looked back to Burns and shook the hacksaw. The blade rattled against its casing.

Simultaneously, Moore also turned to face him. The twin glare of their cap lights nearly blinded him. He raised a hand to shield his eyes as the chasm that had opened within him yawned wider still. For a single uncertain moment, he felt as if he might plunge into the chaos that churned there.

As though from a great distance, he heard Moore's voice degenerate into sobs of desperation, saw Holland turn and strike him a single blow with the tamping bar. The glare diminished as Moore stumbled away.

Holland stepped up to meet him, the tamping bar upraised, the hacksaw dangling in his left hand; there was no mistaking the threat implicit in his posture.

"Do it," he hissed.

Burns moved closer to the wiry cashier, suddenly aware that he could wrest the tamping bar from the smaller man in less than an instant; in a moment of sudden clarity, he saw that Holland knew this, too. Beyond the mask of his bravado there lay a core of desperate fear. Burns saw that Holland had not perceived the creature's beauty. He could not, for fear drove him, perhaps it always had.

Turning away, he began to move toward Moore, slumped by the dark mouth of the undercut. He hadn't gone more than two steps before Holland spoke. "Did you say you had a wife and child?"

Burns hunkered down by Moore, rested a calloused hand against his shoulder. "That's what I said."

"Sauls Run," Holland said. "Not much work here, unless you're a miner."

"Please," Moore whispered. "Do you know what this means? It's true, all true..."

A fleeting image of that church story — the Rapture, Burns suddenly recalled — passed through his mind: angels, erupting by the thousand from

beneath the mountains of the dying planet. True? *The Lord's with us*, Moore had said, and he had replied, *Lucky, I reckon*.

The hacksaw clattered to the floor behind him.

"Winter's coming," Holland said. "Hard season for a man without a job. Hard season for his family."

Burns emitted a strangled laugh, lifted his hand, and touched his fingers to Moore's stubbled face. Moore's lips trembled, and tears slid down his cheeks. Burns could smell the sour taint of his breath. "An angel," Moore whispered, and cursing, Burns stood and turned away.

That image — angels erupting from the subterranean dark — returned to haunt him as he stooped to pick up the hacksaw; he dismissed it with an almost physical effort. Not an angel, insisted some fragment of his mind. Some pagan god or demon; a monstrous creature out of myth; an evolutionary freak, caught in the midst of the transformation from beast to man — but not an angel.

A creature, nothing more.

He crossed the room without a word and knelt beside

— *the giant, the angel* —

— the creature. At the base of the thick-rooted wings, its flesh curled horny and tough, almost pebbled. Its back heaved with the regular cadence of its respiration. He could not bring himself to look it in the face.

Burns closed his eyes and drew in a long breath. He could hear the whispered litany of Moore's prayers, the faraway cymbal clash of the water drip. He thought of the coming winter, harsh in these mountains, and once again, that great love surprised him. For a moment, limned against the dark screens of his eyelids, he could almost see them, Rona and the baby, shining with an all too human beauty. Fragile and ephemeral, that beauty was, but a man could get his mind about it. A man could hold it.

He exhaled and opened his eyes.

Nothing had changed. Winged giants slept in the earth, but nothing had changed. The world was as it had been always.

"Do it, you son of a bitch," Holland said, and despite the fact that less than an hour ago Burns had not known that such creatures existed in the world, despite the fact that even now every molecule of air seemed to flare with a beauty so radiant that it was painful even to behold — despite all this, Burns began the terrible task.

The creature stirred when the hacksaw bit into the root of the near wing; its fingers drew into talons, its breath shuddered into a quicker rhythm, but it did not wake. Burns's muscles tightened into the work, sweat broke out along his hairline. The hide was tough as old hickory, but at last, with a noise like wind through dry leaves, the wing fell away. Burns kicked it aside. In the pale luminescence of his cap light, the wing stump glistened like a bloody mouth. Sighing, he stepped over the creature to start at the second wing. Once again, he leaned into the saw, once again dragged it back through the thick flesh, but this time — for no reason he would ever be able to discern — he looked up, looked directly into the creature's face.

And saw that it was awake.

The sounds of Moore's prayers and Holland's panicked respiration receded as Burns gazed into the creature's eye, so blue it might have been a scrap of April sky.

He felt as if he was falling, down and down into that endless blue, but he felt no fear. A wave of gratitude that he could not contain flooded through him — to have seen such beauty, to have touched it. Once again, the entire room seemed to flare with light, and for the space of a single instant, he perceived, beyond the shabby guise of reality, an inner radiance that permeated all things. Then, as suddenly as if he had shut off his cap light, the radiance was gone, overwhelmed by a tide of wretched exhilaration. No other man had ever mastered such a creature.

Burns flung away the hacksaw in disgust.

The creature's eye had closed. He could not tell that it had ever awakened.

A suffocating knot formed in his throat, and for the first time in the long year he had worked the mines, claustrophobia overcame him. The walls pressed inward. The entire weight of the mountain loomed over him.

Holland stepped up, his face blanched, his eyes reduced to glints far back in shadowy hollows. "Finish it," he said.

Burns wrested the tamping bar away from him and let it clatter to the floor. "Finish it yourself."

With a last glance at Moore, he pushed the cashier aside, ducked through the undercut and the empty room beyond, and emerged into the heading. From far down in the shaft, there echoed the din of a sledgehammer as a work crew snaked new track deeper into the planet.

He wondered what beauty they might eventually lay bare; he wondered what they would do with it.

Turning away, Burns began to walk slowly along the tracks that led to the surface. Men moved by him, nodding as they passed, and sometimes a loaded car muscled through the shaft; in the rooms that opened to either side, he heard the easy talk that came at shift's end. He had no part in that now. Deliberately, he turned his mind to other things, to the surface, where the sky would be fading toward night. He imagined the stench of burning slag riding the high currents; imagined the tin roofs of Sauls Run, faraway in the steep-walled valley, throwing off the last gleam of evening sun.

Presently, he emerged from the earth. He paused by the cashier's shack and fished the cigarette out of his breast pocket. His coal-smeared hands shook a little as he struck the match, and then harsh sweet smoke filled his lungs. He exhaled a gray plume and surveyed the valley below.

Everything—the sky, the smell, the flash of sunlight against the tin roofs of town—was just as he had imagined it. Nothing, nothing had changed. Drawing in another lungful of smoke, Burns started down the mountain to Sauls Run, to Rona and the baby. High above the painted ridges, the day began to blue into darkness, and a breath of autumn wind touched him, chill with the foreboding of winter.



Felicity Savage sold her first two novels to Roc Books last year. Her short fiction has appeared in F&SF and Tomorrow Magazine. She is currently finishing her second year at Columbia University.

About "The Earth's Erogenous Zones," she writes, "I got the idea for the story through one of those fortuitous mishearings: I was sitting in geology class one day, half-asleep, when I thought I heard the T.A. say something about 'the earth's erogenous zones.' Images of steamy tropical islands and crackpot Edwardian scientists swam into my mind, and I perked up, but she had moved on. I suspect she was actually talking about fault lines, or something of the sort, but the seed of fantasy was sown, and before long this exotic setting had developed into a fable of misplaced aspirations."

The Earth's Erogenous Zones

By Felicity Savage

SAILORS SCRAMBLED OVER *Silver Wind's* rigging, readying her to sail, as Dolores climbed down the hill, swaying and slipping on the rope ladder.

Above her, Charles supervised the lowering of the baggage into the canoe. Below, the governor of Shikaroa was welcoming her politely to the island. Dolores sank into the canoe and tried to smile at him. Her stockings chafed her thighs. Prickly heat washed over her in waves. She was afraid the natives had seen up her petticoat, and as a concession to the heat, she wore no drawers. Madness! she thought wearily. To have come all the way to this Godforsaken speck of land just to prove Charles' theory right!

But she would have followed him much farther, if he had asked her to. He was her life.

The canoe pulled away from *Silver Wind*, wallowing under the weight of trunks and carpet bags and expensive phonograph. Charles was swapping conversational gambits with the governor, a grizzled Scotsman who wanted to hear news from Home, trying to find out if they could hire islanders to guide

them into the jungle. The air grew stickier and hotter as the green arms of Shikaroa closed around the bay. Dolores looked back at the clipper. It was sheering rapidly off the coast. Unbidden tears of homesickness sprang to her eyes. *Silver Wind* had been her home for almost a year: the other passengers' wives had helped her pretend she was still in England. Now there was nothing between her and the heat and the crystal water. Nothing except Charles.

"I canna for the life of me understand why ye're wanting to go inland," the governor said. "Much less —" he nodded at Dolores — "tak' yer lady. The natives themselves will not go into the heart o' the jungle! They say they never have. Course, could be they just want to hang around town, and they're inventin' excuses not to go back, but mebbe there's truly something that they're feared of. I'd bear it in mind, were I yerself."

"It's all in the name of Science," Charles said cheerfully. "And I'd be lost without Dolly. I'd probably forget to eat. She looks after me like my mother did."

"But why have ye come all the way out here?" the governor persisted. "Ye collectin' specimens? I'd be back in Edinburgh right now if I'd the choice."

"I have a radical theory," Charles coughed significantly. "Modern. Not really suitable..." He cast a glance in Dolores' direction. He liked to act as if he spared her the embarrassing details of his scientific research. Usually she enjoyed the sheltered, womanly feeling that gave her. But today she found herself thinking, *I know as much about the theory as he does. Why does he have to be so childish!* And she was scandalized at the very thought.

"I'm in the forefront of scientific thought," Charles said pompously. "When I come back from this trip, the Royal Geographic Society is going to publish my book."

They'd laughed Charles out of the society, though before he came up with this new theory, he had been a respected member, and out of the society for Psychological Research, where he had gone afterward. If Dolores had heard the theory from a stranger, she would have laughed too. But she had tried to understand, and so she had seen the perverse logic behind it. It was like a fairy tale. And Dolores wanted it to be true. She wanted Charles to capture his evidence on the phonograph cylinders, vindicate himself, and take her home.

The water lapping against the sides of the canoe was perfectly clear. She

could see all the way down to the floor of the bay. Tiny crabs scuttled on the sand, seeming to leap upward as the currents altered her perception. The drops thrown up by the paddles felt as warm on her hands and cheeks as the air. The jungle encroached on the bay like a pulsating green mist, scarcely dented by the brown shanty-town at the head of the bay. No human noises came from the island. Only the faint, strident babel of the jungle.

Dolores shuddered.

Weeks later, dark breaths of air brushed over her nightgown like invisible hands. She lay on her cot, listening to the jungle's rustle outside the tent. Sweat greased her crotch, glued her arms to her sides. It was insufferably hot here even at night. Charles said they were right upon the Equator. She felt that invisible line going straight through her, skewering her. He had measured her spread-eagled body to locate this very spot on the Earth's body. Terribly improper of her, to let him use her like that! Now she was sewed here, fastened —

She tossed, shattering the illusion.

Outside, small things shrieked, squealed, ticked, and banged with unsettling frequency into the tent. There had never been so much noise in London. But in Dorset, it had been more like this. She remembered lying in her starched bed, her hair in two pigtailed, clutching the Raggy that her dead mother had made her, listening to the martens twittering under the eaves. Or the mice in the skirting boards. Or on summer evenings, the hired hands exchanging bawdy jokes in the courtyard. Young Dolores grinned fiercely to herself when she understood their innuendoes.

"A passionate little girl whose smiles flickered across her face like white lightning." She'd read that in one of her father's notebooks, after he died. He had devoted reams of paper to her. Her mother had died when Dolores was three, and her father had taken charge of her. He'd taught her Horace, Homer, and Montaigne, archery and knife-throwing. Fancy cookery and needlework were not even in her vocabulary. On winter nights, she would lie by the fire in his study, cuddling Mary the whippet. If she had a nightmare later on, she would jump into her father's bed for comfort.

(Drenched with rain, dashing across a wide green field all alone, shrill laughter escaping her)

(Swimming naked in the river in flood, her father leaning on his malacca

cane on the bank, applauding when she turned a somersault in the water)

(Older: kissing Peter the gardener's son, catching her breath with excitement as his hands ventured under her boy's shirt and trousers, as the rain drummed on the roof of the hay barn; he was a year older than she and she thought she was in love)

Her father had raised her as "a pure human being, uncorrupted by society." Somehow he had combined loving her with using her as an experiment.

She had married Charles right after her father died. He was the nephew of a family friend, come to help her sort through the years of accumulated possessions in the country house. She had loved him because he was so big and solid, because he told her not to worry, he would take care of it. When he proposed, she had felt she was being rescued. She threw herself into his life in the city, made his friends' wives her friends, took an interest in his experiments, utterly rejecting the solitary, eccentric life she had led with her father.

But sometimes it had been difficult. Days of rain pounding on the roof when she could not go outside. Days when she was so glad of an unexpected caller, a tradesman at the door, an unruly housemaid to discipline—*anything* to take her mind off her predicament—days when she had cried upstairs, alone, desperate for someone, anyone, to hear her.

In other words, she had not yet escaped the longing for her father. She had not completely gotten away from the thing that Charles was seeking out in the jungle with his phonograph. And she could no longer pretend that she wanted him to find it, in who knows what strength of concentration, here.

She twisted onto her stomach, thrusting her face into her pillow to prevent her cries from waking the native maid.

The phonograph emitted a soft, steady click-click-click as Charles cranked the handle, perched on a folding chair, staring into the night. "I'm here. I've come."

He had done all he could. His powerlessness was both exhilarating and humbling.

"Speak to me. Please."

He had triangulated this location from all six continents, using Dolly's body as a model, measuring the distances from her feet, hands, head, and

navel to her mound of Venus. It wouldn't have mattered what woman he measured — the Earth was Everywoman. The proportions would have worked out the same. And that an island lay exactly at this latitude — didn't that prove his theory?

But the Society had not thought so. So he had come here, to collect incontrovertible proof. A recording of her voice.

The scent of the jungle was heady, ethereal. A thousand species of flowers bloomed here. He had crushed dozens of treefrogs underfoot, setting up his equipment in the twilight. The water hyacinths which clogged the myriad streams emitted a sweet stink. None of the flowers seemed to need rain to bloom. This was the lushest jungle he had ever seen: an equatorial hothouse, nourished by the salt air.

But wasn't this, after all, her birthing mouth? he thought lyrically. Where else should she be more prolific?

Secretly, he knew, his colleagues envied his leap of intellect. What they could not stand was that it reduced *their* ideas to mere trifles, like candles before dawn. His *terra sentiens* theory was the ultimate melding of Science and Reason, dwarfing all of their feeble explanations of human existence, surpassing them, a tenuous web extrapolated from a dream.

But that very intangibility was its strength. No one could disprove it. And he remembered that first dream so clearly...!

That dream had been the purest, finest moment in a life spent dabbling in science purely for the prestige it brought him. He had been lying beside Dolores in their bedroom in London, listening to the produce-carts rumbling down the street in the dark, bored and restless from the frustrations of the day. And he had drifted into a half-waking dream. Disorienting warmth enveloped him. He felt himself rocked tenderly, as if he were a baby again in his nurse's arms. Yet the warmth was intensely sexual, too, and little by little, lust entered him and grounded him. He was making love to this huge, invisible being, thrusting into her. He heard her voice: enormous, multi-tongued. And he knew that if he could only distinguish the words she spoke, he would possess the secret to this mingling of physical fulfillment and spiritual joy. This was it. The goal. The mystery that everyone was working toward.

And he started bolt upright, breathing hard. His awareness of that vast, deep mystery evaporated like a puddle in the heat of day.

But the aftermath of physical arousal remained, and his mind raced. He

thought, *Everyone has experienced this at some point, even if he can't remember. Even if he was in the womb at the time. But only I, Charles Ruthven, can put it into words. All I have to do is go to her. To her.*

Only I know where she is to be found.

Now, two years later, here he was. The jungle whispered around him. The phonograph clicked.

"You can speak!" he whispered. "Indulge me! It won't cost you anything, but to me it means fame and fortune." He saw himself leaning back in an armchair in the Royal Geographic Society, a briar pipe dangling from his fingers, a bottle of bourbon on a silver tray at his side, a copy of his epoch-making treatise on the reading table. His one-time detractors clustering around him, hanging on his every word.

It would be the discovery of the century. That Darwin fellow would have to eat his words.

Click. Click. Click.

The night wore on. His torso rose and dipped as he cranked the phonograph, slower now. The humid night air licked his face. Something furry crawled up his trouser leg; drowsily, he shook it off....

"Iyez."

A female voice. *Look*, in Shikaroan.

He started upright, listening.

"Isn't he afraid? Does he know the danger?" This voice was male. "The longer we stay, the less hope we have of escaping! How can we make him leave?"

Jealousy flared hotly in Charles. The female voice was undoubtedly *her*. How dare she be so capricious as to manifest herself to one of the natives? How dare she?

"I'm afraid too," she whispered.

Charles shut his eyes tight. Tears oozed between his lashes.

"But don't relinquish your soul to God yet, *shichu*. Manal suggested to me a way to save us all."

Her voice was not at all as Charles remembered. But the hair on his nape bristled and his forehead sweated, the air in the clearing gone suddenly thick, and he could hardly breathe for the smell of the water hyacinths.

"Want me to get rid of this scoundrel?" he said aloud, pugnaciously, to

her. "Anything. I'll do anything for you. Just ask —"

He heard a sharp, frightened intake of breath, and the noise of someone scrambling away through the undergrowth. Good. The man was gone. He sat forward, scarcely daring to breathe. "Come closer..." She was so close that he felt the air stirred by her movement, heard her feet shifting on the leaves. He heard her breathing shallowly. She said, "You're mine...all mine, Charles Ruthven." She laughed with what was almost girlish nervousness.

Wordlessly, he stood up and held out his arms.

In London, she'd been a formless presence. Here, at the very wellspring of her power, she had taken on humanity. Her maternal vastness had intensified into a woman form, like air compressed into liquid. She danced in and out of his hands, giggling as he paddled the air before him with grim desperation, trying to catch her. Wet, silken skin kissed his fingertips. She was utterly naked, covered with sweat. The thought of her naked in the jungle aroused him to the point of insanity. He pleaded disjointedly with her. For a brief, heady moment she thrust herself against him. He felt her teeth on his earlobe and her prickly little Venus mound pressing into his leg. He clutched her close, trying to tip her head back so he could taste her lips —

And she slid out of his arms.

The air was thin and empty.

He stumbled after her, lowing wordlessly.

And he lost his balance, and sat down heavily in a stream. Lukewarm water quenched his arousal. Hyacinth roots tangled his ankles. He cursed aloud, repetitively.

"Can I help, master?" asked one of the bearers' voices. Callused hands fastened on Charles' elbows. The voice was deferential, but Charles heard an unmistakable note of amusement.

This might be the man who had fled the clearing earlier. Or it might not.

In any case, there was nothing to be gained by acting like a guilty school boy.

"Get me out of this piss-gully!" he growled, struggling to his feet. "But don't pack up the phonograph. In fact, change the cylinder. I shall stay out the rest of the night."

When you sleep during the day, you sleep close to the surface. You have dreams you think are real. But when you wake, the images evaporate, and you

feel vaguely contaminated, the way you do after Charles has his way with you. Your pillows smell as stale as your mouth tastes. Flies hover around the cot. You pull out the silver watch on its chain and it confirms your worst fears: it is the middle of a sticky, withering, overblown afternoon. You have spoiled your chances for sleep tonight. The hours of darkness yawn ahead, punctuated only by the possible return of your husband — and that is such a distant possibility: he's entrenched in the jungle, determined to stay there until he finds what he seeks. From the natives' reports, he has not slept in three days. You imagine him with his hair wild, his cheeks splotchy, and you feel a terrible longing to spruce him up and make him eat, but you know he would not have you. Tears squeeze past your lashes. You plop down on the edge of the cot, sobbing loudly, longing for someone, *anyone*, to overhear you. Then you fall limply back onto the cot, clutching the watch like a talisman.

Sunlight comes through the roof of the tent, bathing the folding teak furniture, the scattered lacy garments, the toilet articles, the maid's empty cot. Outside the tightly laced door-flaps, the jungle is silent: it too sleeps during the day. You have no idea where the hired servants are, not even the girl Elizabeth. The shadows of the trees on the roof are spooky, unmoving. Aloneness breathes down your neck. Your heart beats fast in panic. But drowsiness overtakes you, and suddenly it all seems too exhausting to bother with.

You doze.

HE IS TALL, brown-skinned, eager. Dolores woke to find his hand sliding inside her décolletage, his thumb and index finger pinching her nipple. His arms were already around her, his mouth dipping to hers. She thrust her hands against his chest, yelping fearfully, but his smile flashed over his face and she was at once entranced and reassured.

"My husband..." she murmured, though she ceased to struggle. "My husband..."

The man shook his head, brows wrinkling, dismissing Charles as an object of hilarity. His irreverence charmed her. She smiled tentatively.

Her earlier tossing and turning had flattened her pillows, gently he lifted her up, plumping them up, then laid her down as carefully as if she were a doll. His knee had found its way between hers. It slid steadily upward, easing her

legs apart, crumpling her dress around her hips, as his fingers worked on the bodice of her gown, tearing the fabric seam by seam. Frowning, he glanced at his finger: a bead of blood stood out at the corner of a ripped nail. "Let me," she whispered. Drawing his hand to her mouth, she sucked the saltiness from the hurt finger. It made her head spin.

He smiled. Taking back his hand, he reached under her, unhooked her corset and eased it aside.

"Ohhh," she gasped. "Ohhh blessed Lord."

His hands slid up under her arms, moving them above her head, and he pinioned her wrists with one hand as his mouth moved down her neck, over her collarbone, between her breasts, leaving a chilly trail in the hot air. His hair smelled wild, like earth. She quivered. "Charles!"

"He'll never know, if you don't tell him," the man said forcefully. His voice was melodic, angry. He had a Shikaroan accent. "Don't even think about him! Just be yourself!" He grinned up at her, and ducked his head, and loose black hair brushed her stomach as his mouth spiraled farther down, his tongue wetting her stomach and her secret hair. Now her hands were free. She clutched his shoulders, pulling his head deeper between her thighs, spreading her legs for him as he mouthed her private lips, his teeth nibbling, invoking pain that was not pain, not pain, not —

And he pulled away. The air licked coldly against her privates. Language lost, she begged him. And he rose over her, his eyes shining, and before his weight came down on her she glimpsed the blood-thick phallus. His chest seared her nipples. His mouth locked over hers, still flavored with her sex. His organ plunged into her, spearing into her very core, impaling her. She yelped into his mouth. Surely with Charles it had never felt this way!

But the pleasure — the *pleasure* —

And she forgot Charles. Forgot him entirely as her lover's thrusts slammed her into the cot, and her arms flopped out to the sides, powerless to stop him, not that she wanted to — not that she wanted to — and she was kissing him back, biting his lips as his thrusts grew shorter and faster, the friction exciting her, and just before he erupted she floated away, frozen, stiff, eyes half-lidded on a wave of ecstasy.

They lay together, their breath growing even. At last he eased out of her. She twitched the sheet up to cover them. He crooked one leg over her, kissing her forehead, reaching lazily down, rubbing that place with lazy, expert

fingers. She convulsed against him, muffling her gasps in his shoulder. This time it was sweet, sweet, a blow of pure delight.

When she could stand no more, they slept.

And she started awake, crying aloud, weeping for something, she did not know what. The shadows of the trees had not moved. The flies buzzed under the bright roof of the tent. The flaps hung open, their laces dangling. Her dress and corset — ravaged as if a wild beast had attacked her — pooled behind her on the cot, the discarded husks of a cicada. Her nether regions throbbed. Scarcely believing, she reached one hand between her legs, and pulled out her silver watch, chain first, smeared with fluid.

She thrust it in revulsion down the side of the cot.

"Elizabeth!" she screamed. "Elizabeth!"

It seemed hours before the maid came running, her bare feet slapping the earth, bringing the scent of wood-smoke. She had been cooking the evening meal, from the smell of her.

"Help me dress," Dolores commanded, trying to disguise her disgust. "I want to come help you with the meal." Hastily, she covered the torn clothes with the sheet. She would dispose of them later. "I daresay the meat could use a dash of Worcester."

"Missy is flushed. She did not sleep well?" Elizabeth's English was mission-school correct, like that of most of the natives.

"I slept poorly. The heat is unbearable. Close the flaps, for the Lord's sake! I shall want undergarments, too."

Elizabeth's silky black hair fell about her face as she rummaged in the open trunk. "It isn't wise to sleep alone, Missy, in the jungle, far from others who are also sleeping. If Missy had unpleasant dreams, perhaps she should not go to sleep again until I, too, am here."

"You weren't here last night!" Dolores said, fastening on another aggravation. "I woke and called for water, and you weren't in your bed!"

Elizabeth swallowed, losing her composure fast. "I — I was — I thought I heard a noise outside!"

Dolores smiled humorlessly. She did not know what Elizabeth had really been up to, and she did not care. "Has anyone else...had unpleasant dreams."

Elizabeth looked up. Moist lips, unreadable eyes; a plaid school girl dress pulled taut over bouncing breasts. She nodded. "Some of my *ushichi* have

dreamed." A smile played briefly over her mouth for a moment. "I, I do not dream."

Dolores resisted the urge to slap her.

Perched on her camp stool above the circle of Shikaroans that evening, she gnawed a haunch of aye-aye, trying not to spatter her napkin with sauce. It was the last damask serviette she had brought from London. Covertly she examined the face of each bearer, trying to recognize the man who had come so confidently into her tent and changed her forever. Had it been any of them?

Or had it been a dream, and had she lain rubbing her watch between her legs, plucking out the stitches of her dress, oblivious to her own shamelessness?

The brown faces in the firelight all looked alike to her. They were laughing and joking in their own tongue. Traitorously, Elizabeth had joined in. Dolores glanced up at the star-speckled night, feeling terribly alone. *What is wrong with me?* she thought forlornly. *If he came again, I would let him take me willingly.*

The truth lit up her mind like burning magnesium.

Shikaroa has stripped me to the raw fruit.

The knowledge dizzied her. Panicking, she rejected it, setting herself afloat on a choppy sea of self-disgust. The fire flared, splashing the circle with light, and the bearers lifted their voices and began to chant. Harsh, inharmonious sonorities. She started violently. "Elizabeth! What — what are they singing?"

Elizabeth had been chanting too, brows drawn together, her voice swooping above the thunder of the men's voices, but she broke off to answer Dolores. "A ward, Missy Ruthven."

"A ward against what?"

The maid shuddered. "She who wants us to pander to her. She who will not be denied. She who wants blood."

"It's all too, too horrible!" Dolores burst out. She stood up and swept away from the circle. Part of her wanted to join in; that was the worst of it. She threw herself down in her tent, tears of anger starting from her eyes.

He felt quite alert tonight. He had not slept in seventy hours: how much more did she expect from him? He stood erect, cranking the phonograph,

shifting from one foot to the other, humming a little tune, indulging in a slightly delirious fantasy of himself as Chairman of the Royal Geographic Society.

When he heard his name — her voice caressing the final *s* like a pet snake — he turned around quite slowly, determined this time to keep his head.

"Mother?"

But he wasn't expecting the mother-entity; his loins were already heating in anticipation of the full-bodied, utterly corporeal woman who had taunted him before.

"Yesss..." she breathed.

Oh Lord. Oh Lord. Charles almost wept as he struggled to contain his exultation. He took a step forward and, keeping the phonograph turning with one hand, flicked the switch he had had his men rig two days ago.

The floodlight over his head spattered sparks, and chemical light poured into the clearing, turning the ground into a black-and-white mosaic, and she fell to her knees and protected her head with her hands, her bottom in the air, a ludicrous picture of guilt. "Oh master Ruthven!" she whimpered, "Don't hurt me — don't hurt me!"

Charles' hand dropped numbly to his side. His mouth felt stiff, so stiff that he could hardly form words. "Elizabeth. Dolly's maid. That's not you, is it?"

She nodded violently, keeping her head covered. "Yes. It is. Oh please, please let me go —" And without waiting for permission, she got up and flung herself at the jungle. She was stark naked, lithe, with a cascade of black curls loose down her back. Charles lunged at her and caught her by one arm. She went limp in his grasp, hanging her head, blubbering in earnest.

"Do you mean that it was you the other night, too?" His mind worked furiously, trying to stay ahead of paralysis.

"Oh, please — yes —"

"Why?" he said bitterly. "Why did you want me to believe I had found what I was looking for? You do know what I was looking for? You did do this deliberately?"

"My *ushichi* know what you seek. I do it for them. They not want you to find *ese*." She shivered. Distractedly, Charles shrugged out of his safari jacket and draped it around her shoulders. He was afraid he knew what *ese* was. If the natives had wanted him to lead them out of the jungle so badly that

they had resorted to making this innocent girl play a part in their deception — then Governor Thomas had been right. They feared something.

And Charles was right, after all — although not in the way he had imagined. There was something to fear.

The floodlight fizzled and went out. A dark wind gusted softly through the clearing, fingering his hair.

Elizabeth clung to him, sobbing noiselessly. A dead silence fell over the forest, like the shadow of a tremendous wing. Gradually Charles became aware of a roaring noise, like the sea, like a thousand small voices. It was the noise that one imagined the stars might make falling out of the sky. It was the twittering of a million sparrows. It came closer, paralyzing him with an atavistic fear of moving in case he should be *sensed* —

He cursed in terror, and scrambled for the backup floodlight.

White light bathed the clearing.

The night sounds of the jungle hit him like a merciful wave.

Elizabeth sagged, weeping harder, and in her sobs he heard a note of terror.

"That's quite enough waterworks!" Charles snapped. "I shan't feel any more kindly disposed to you whether you cry your eyes out or not. Stop it!"

She looked at him, startled into holding back her sobs. Her black eyes, framed with wet, clumped lashes, were uncommonly beautiful. "What — what are you going to do to me?"

"Mmm." He frowned. He felt ashamed of his abruptness. The *terra sentiens* of his dreams did not exist: there was nothing but Elizabeth with her hot skin and her wet lashes

But that did not mean all was lost.

The nature of the proof that he expected to find on Shikaroa had been his secret. The phonograph — brought in secret. If he brought back something other than what he had secretly hoped for, who would ever know? Certainly not the Society. Nor the public, whose appetite for freaks, curiosities, and scientific discoveries dubbed The Greatest In Living Memory seemed insatiable.

The whirl inside Charles' mind cleared, like muddy water settling. For the first time he could see his way clear to that seat of state in the Society.

It was almost relieving to fall back on everyday, tangible methods of achieving his goals instead of straining to pin down a vision.

"Elizabeth? What will you do for me, to make up for deceiving me?"

"Anything, master," she said eagerly. "Anything, be you don't hurt my *ushichi* —"

Charles dismissed her *ushichi* with a wave of his hand. "Your English is much better than you're letting on. I've heard you talk to Dolly. Save that pidgin for public appearances — it's what they will expect at Home."

"Master?"

"Oh, stop pretending, girl." He sat down on the leaves, in the comfortable brightness of the floodlight, and pulled her down facing him. A fat slug splatted from a tree branch to the ground and began to inch hurriedly toward the shade. "I need you to play a part," Charles said. "I want you to leave Shikaroa and come back to London with me. Your name will be Earth Incarnate. All you need to do is put on the native costume of Shikaroa and behave as though you don't know any English. Make some mystical gestures. Sing some of your native songs. You'll be famous, and so will I. And when the public gets tired of you, you can go home. Or wherever you want."

A smile began to curve her mouth. "I think I like the sound of this," she said.

"Call me Charles." He could not take his eyes off the shifting shadows in the collar of the jacket.

"But what about Mrs. Ruthven? How will she like this plan? She loves you dearly. She may be jealous, even though I am to be only your employee."

"Oh," Charles said tiredly. "Oh, Dolly." He shut his eyes, and then opened them again. "She's a dear girl, really. Very pliant. No trouble at all."

Elizabeth smiled. "Charles. I think we...how do you say? I think we see eye to eye. Ever since I was a little girl at the mission school, I have wanted to have lots of money."

"Yes?"

"When the English first came to Shikaroas, I could not get any of the coins Governor Thomas scattered on the beach, because I was too small to fight for them. It was then I knew what I wanted." Black eyes stared guilelessly at Charles. "Lost of money. And an English lover."

Dolores emerged from her tent next morning, pushing her hair off a sweaty forehead. She had lain awake all night, unable to sleep for wondering if he would come. And he had not come, and the dawn filtering through the

roof had brought pure, wordless despair. And Elizabeth was missing, so that Dolores had had to arrange her toilet by herself this morning. The girl was impossible!

She blinked. The camp had vanished. Circles of pale ground surrounded the earth-damped fire-pit. The sky brooded gray and high over the crowns of the trees. On the northern fringe of the clearing, bearers loaded the mules with bundles. A breeze smelling of water hyacinths lifted Dolores' hair. "What are you doing?" she shouted to them. "Where is Mr. Ruthven?"

The natives looked at each other. Finally one of them came over. "He said he is ready to leave. We waited for you to wake. We may take the tent now?" He barked an order over his shoulder. Two more men slipped around Dolores and started jimmying out the stakes.

"You may not!" Dolores felt tears coming to her eyes. "All my things are — " She trailed off, defeated. What did it matter if they exposed her lacy underpinnings to the air? What had she left to expose? She said in a voice that was almost a whisper, "Where is my husband?"

"Missy, he asked us not to — "

"He's not in his hide is he?"

"No."

"Tell me!"

Sullenly, the man pointed.

She gathered up her skirt and walked to the edge of the clearing, pushed her way between thick, water-laden leaves. The temperature had increased since yesterday, as if the clouds had let the heat down to the earth, but not out again. The ground was spongy with excess water. Lurid shoots poked up through the rapidly disintegrating leaf-mold. Dolores' feet were soon sopping. Once she stepped on a snake that slithered with little splashing noises into a tangle of vines. She flung her arm round a massive trunk, holding on as if for dear life.

And hanging there she saw Elizabeth, not ten yards away, writhing on a spread tarpaulin. Charles sprawled on top of her, sucking greedily first on one engorged nipple and then the other. Elizabeth must have seen Dolores: her face went blank. Charles continued to feed on her breasts. Staring past him, she seized a handful of his hair and twisted his head around. His mouth opened. Then, hastily, he hitched himself away from Elizabeth and struggled into his trousers. A brilliant flush rose from his collarbone to his ears. As if

she hadn't seen it all before.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ruthven!" Elizabeth moaned. "I'm sorry!" She seized her plaid dress and pulled it over herself like a sheet, huddling into a ball, tucking her limbs under the scrap of fabric.

"It's not your fault, Lizzy!" Charles said. Now that his shame was hidden by clothes, he seemed to be recovering fast. "Dolly, what are you *doing* here?" He advanced toward her, pointing a finger at her chest, heckling her. "You must have come with the bearers. Where are they? I told them not to move until we came back! I told them to let you sleep!"

Dolores' limbs were watery with fear. "They did let me sleep. How could you do this?" she whispered. The ground seemed to be slipping from under her feet. She felt as if she might slide off at any moment. Charles had always been her support, and now there was nothing. Wisteria Avenue and the stately, strained life she'd led there seemed to be a sandy spit, precarious footing, now rapidly being eaten away by the twin tides of her childhood and Shikarua.

Charles spat with anger as he talked. "You were brought up to be intelligent, not feminine, Dolly! Don't you know that was why I married you? I needed a helpmeet! And then you even rejected your intelligence. You should be grateful I've stayed faithful to you this long! You couldn't satisfy any man!"

She felt nothing but pity for him. He had betrayed her with Elizabeth — but he had already betrayed her with his theory, no matter how hard she had tried to convince herself otherwise. Before that, with his obsessive scientific dabbings. The process of desertion had been happening ever since they married. The only thing different now was that *this* mistress was flesh and blood, reducing his infidelity from a selfless dedication to an easy, common sin.

The scent of hyacinths was intense. There must be a brook somewhere nearby, for she thought she could hear water trickling. "I blame myself, Charles," she said over the noise in her head. "Well, maybe I blame my upbringing. But that *is* me. I know that now. I blame myself for being such a good wife. For denying myself. I thought it was my duty not to complain." She laughed, shaking her head. "I *revelled* in duty."

He looked pitifully confused at her lack of anger. She appeared to have deflated him. He stood there with the mud squishing between his bare toes,

his braces trailing in the mud, his hands working emptily by his sides. She remembered how those fingers had used to brush her arm as he passed by her chair, rub her neck as she perused one of his accounts. Had those touches meant anything at all? Or might he just as easily have caressed the chair itself? He had taken her for granted so completely that he had never even stopped to wonder if she needed tenderness.

"Please forgive me," he said now. "Please." His face was as hopeless as that of a little boy who knows he will be punished. "I love you, Dolly. I need you."

He did need her. She had always comforted herself with that thought. But though her whole body ached with battling passions, she could not apply them to the matter at hand. She could not make herself care about him, nor feel sorry for his loss. Fear had given way to a pressing need to be free of him, of the whole wearying mess. Unable to express her desperation in words, she stepped around him, into the forest. The leaves closed behind her.

"Dolly!"

She started to run. His steps slowed, halted, then turned back to the clearing.

Her breath sounded harsh in her ears. Lianas lashed her face and bare hands. Her heeled boots chopped into the soggy ground. Time and time again she blundered through streams, soaking skirt and petticoat, until she heard a voice in her ear, as calm as if it came from the eye of the storm inside her head.

"Dolores."

She fell to a halt, panting.

She stood on the verge of a lake of black, scum-covered water. Jungle trees nodded over the shores, their roots clawing into the water. The clear center of the lake reflected the sky. A powerful smell of lotus-flowers emanated from several white beauties blooming amidst their leaves.

"Dolores!"

And she recognized the voice. Well-springs of emotion that had been paved over since before she married broke open. She turned, half-choking, and blurted, "Father —"

For a moment it was Mr. Shaw. The gray mustache, the immaculate collar, the malacca cane over one arm.

Then the clothing dissolved. Her lover seized her hands in his. Behind

him, the jungle melted into a green mist.

Somehow, she kept herself from sagging into his arms. He tugged at her. She frowned. "It was so easy to leave him," she said, struggling for words. "It seems wrong that it should be so easy. I've been trying not to give way to these impulses for so long, and if we hadn't come to Shikaroa, I would still be safe. Miserable, but safe."

"Safe — or jailed?" he asked softly.

His black eyes were full of concern. She wanted to make love to him. No, she wanted to sleep in his arms like a child. No, she wanted — "I don't know," she said, almost crying. "I don't know!"

"You've come full circle. Back to where you started." Gently, he pulled her into his arms. This time, she permitted it. His fingers rubbed over her back. "Not many people ever get the chance to know themselves this way."

"But I didn't want it," she sobbed into his chest. "I never wanted it. Charles did. Why didn't it come to him? Instead of me?"

"He wasn't ready. He was so certain of what he wanted to see that he couldn't see the truth when it pressed close around him." He kissed her.

"Oh, lord. Oh lord." Crying quietly, powerless to resist any more, she let him pull her down to her knees. His fingers were soft as leaves creeping over her face. The cold was a shock, but his caresses soothed her shivering, and she lay still, breathing evenly. She thought she might just sleep this time.

He smelled pungent, but without a hint of unpleasantness, not like Charles. Sweet. Like water hyacinths. Like lotuses. "Lie still," he whispered, and as the blackness crept up and over her she started up, crying, panicking as the air swirled out of her lungs in a series of gasps. But then she remembered she wanted this, she wanted to sleep. She let herself sink. Soft. Deeper. Deeper.

She did not even feel it when she bobbed to the surface again, face down.





A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

ANTARCTICA AND MARS

RECENTLY I was mulling over my favorite authors, and it struck me that often a writer's essential flavor can be summed up by one of his book titles. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*. Hemingway, *In Our Time*.

At least it's an amusing game. I picked *The Stars My Destination* for Alfred Bester, *Star Maker* for Olaf Stapledon, *Childhood's End* for Arthur C. Clarke. Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Word for World is Forest*. Poul Anderson, *Time and Stars*.

Then I thought of that ceaseless advocate of the space program, Robert Heinlein. Surely his mood and attitude is captured by *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Space as gritty, huge, hard, real.

Which depressed me a bit, for today the space program's spirit is

anything but that. A diffuse unreality pervades NASA. Similarly, James Gunn's definitive treatment of the radio search for intelligent life, *The Listeners* — not a bad title choice for his essential theme, since Gunn is one of our best social critics — now seems quite optimistic, since Congress recently killed the program (though the Planetary Society plans to carry on, using public donations). Were all these hopeful outlooks in sf simply naive?

I reflected back on my own involvement with space, from the freckled kid reading Willy Ley and Arthur Clarke describing how rockets worked, to a consultant for NASA and the Planetary Society. Somehow a lot of the zip has gone out of space for a lot of us, and for the public, too. Why?

We went wrong just after Apollo, I think. James Fletcher was NASA Administrator from 1971 to 1977,

when the Shuttle was being proposed, designed and checked out—or rather, not checked out. He convinced Congress that this nifty little reusable rocket-cum-space-plane gadget would get magically cheaper and cheaper to fly, eventually delivering payloads to orbit for a few hundred dollars a pound.

The cost now is over \$5000 a pound, and still climbing as missions get delayed and services shrink. A twenty-fold increase, allowing for inflation. The Nixon administration bequeathed to us an econo-ride Shuttle (and Jimmy Carter signed the appropriations bill for it). They also axed the remaining Apollo missions and the 1970s version of the space station, though they weren't vital. Their killing the long-range research for a Mars mission had great effects, however, because we now have no infrastructure developed for large deep space missions.

Then came the *Challenger* disaster, with Fletcher in charge again. In the *Challenger* commission report he allowed as how "Congress has provided excellent oversight and generous funding and in no way that I know of contributed to the accident." Except, of course, for consistent under-funding and pressure to attain goals set by people with little or no technical competence.

The shuttle is a spaceship designed by a committee of lawyers. "The fault was not with any single person or group but was NASA's fault," Fletcher went on, "and I include myself as a member of the NASA team." As Joe Haldeman sardonically remarked, "Most people would say he was more than just a member."

And we can't even buy shuttles in quantity. The Fletcher-Nixon vision saw a flight a week. That got scaled down to twenty-four a year, then twelve. In 1989 there were nine, in 1990 six, with that abysmal prospect, a flight every few months, apparently settling in as the normal routine.

Unmanned exploration was once the virtually unblemished, high-minded face of space. Now our failures accumulate. The wrong lens curvature of the Hubble telescope. The big antenna which won't deploy aboard Galileo as it limps toward Jupiter, years late; we could have sent it directly, on a Proton booster the Soviets offered us at bargain rates, but politics of the late 1980s ruled that out. The Titans that explode with billion-dollar packages aboard, the satellites which go awry.

And the Mars Observer, lost to unknown error or just bad luck. My personal guess at the time was that

while a small chip manufacturer is now getting blamed, there is an interesting coincidence that we lost contact after the thruster tanks were being pressurized. Tanks have exploded on missions before—remember Apollo 13—and in both cases they had been engineered to three times the expected design limits. The review panel fingered the same plausible culprit, but basically we will never know.

The repair of the Hubble Telescope lifted spirits a bit, but face facts: it was a repair job we should not have had to do at all. The Hubble mission was overloaded with tasks, and NASA elected to do them all with One Big Shot—a poor strategy when you're pushing the envelope in several different directions.

It wasn't always so. Both Voyager spacecraft—remember them?—returned a very interesting bonus in mid-1993—a burst of low frequency electromagnetic radiation. We believe these emissions came from beyond the spacecraft, about a hundred astronomical units from the sun (an A.U. is the distance from the sun to your house). A big flare eruption on the sun had propagated past the spacecraft and the emissions came at a time when the fast-streaming particles, going about 100 km/sec, struck something about twenty or

thirty A.U. further out. What?

Plasma physicists identified the emissions as probably waves radiated by those particles as they ploughed into the shock wave which separates our solar neighborhood from the true deep-space plasma that ranges between the stars. Thus the Voyagers may have sensed the boundary of our little solar comfort zone. Within a decade or so they will cross that standing transition, where the plasma density drops and true interstellar space begins, a "wall" more meaningful than the orbital radius of Pluto.

Voyager was a miracle. We caught the big brass ring on that one, beginning when an orbital specialist noted in 1963 that a Grand Tour could be won by looping a probe past several of the outer planets. The window for this orbital high wire act opens every 175 years, but the last time, when Thomas Jefferson was President, we missed the chance. In 1972, when astronauts still trod the moon, we decided to go for the launch window in 1977.

I don't think NASA could do that today. Hell, it couldn't even decide to not do it that quickly. In just five years during the 1970s NASA invented and developed nuclear-power batteries which are still running, sixteen years after launch. It

assembled fail-safe computers, and electronics that withstood the proton sleet of Jupiter, where a human would die of an hour's exposure. Built to give us Jupiter and Saturn, they still forge outward after gliding past Uranus and Neptune as well.

Voyager is a legacy of the 1960s, a child of the hustling Space Age that wanted to do everything it could (and a few things it couldn't, like building a true space plane). The Voyagers keep sailing on just as they were, dutifully sending back reports to a society that has changed profoundly.

Nothing follows them. Sure, Galileo is bound for Jupiter, due to arrive in 1995, but there it stops. NASA passed up the Halley's comet mission, while other nations went. Nothing will go to Saturn for many years. The proposed Cassini probe which does finally reach Saturn, probably sometime in the next millennium, will drop a vessel named Huygens onto Titan, the second largest moon in the solar system and to me the most interesting place of all.

Titan has a surface pressure not much different from that in your living room. It is far colder, but its thick atmosphere holds the organic chemicals we know existed on the early Earth. Has some slow, cold chemistry been at work there, conjuring up life forms utterly different

from our own? Impossible to say, for our only closeup look showed only the featureless upper cloud deck of a methane atmosphere.

The stretching out of missions is getting worse. Galileo was planned to get to Jupiter in 1985. Though cooperation between the US and the Russians keeps getting talked about, it still has not materialized in solid ways. The recent agreements to combine our operations with the Mir station are a good sign, and probably will work out. But it's still only a beginning.

Gorbachev in 1987-88 sounded much like Khrushchev, talking up space. George Bush in 1989 resembled Kennedy, setting a goal: a manned Mars landing by the 50th anniversary of the Apollo landing, 2019. Both leaders sounded the charge. Both countries yawned and changed the subject. Shortly afterward, they changed the leaders, too.

What's different? The game has changed. It isn't national rivalry any more, and probably won't be for quite a while.

Bruce Murray, former director of the Jet Propulsion Lab and professor at CalTech, pointed out to me many of these curious analogies and features of the Space Age, but his most striking analogy reached even further back.

Once we had a distant, hostile goal, and men threw themselves at it, too: Antarctica. Early in this century, Scott and Amundsen raced for the south pole with whole nations cheering them on. The Edwardian Englishman who tried to impose his own methods died. The savvy Norwegian who adapted to the hostile continent came through smoothly.

Others tried to follow. Shackleton made some progress, and then national rivalry became far more serious: World War I swallowed up the exploratory energies. Admiral Byrd and others made headway between the wars, but true, methodical Antarctic exploration did not resume in earnest until the International Geophysical Year, 1957.

The wars gave the International Geophysical Year teams cheap, reliable air and sea transport technology. (Scientists don't like to talk about it much, but modern war bequeaths science a feast of intriguing gadgets.) Military services were happy to assist, exercising their capabilities. International though the spirit was, national and territorial claims did not vanish; Argentina and Chile still mutter over their rights to turf. Indeed, perhaps the major reason nobody disturbs the present high-minded international air is that no serious resources seem to be at stake.

Discover a rich field for mining or pumping and all bets are off.

Scott-Amundsen: Apollo. Shackleton and Byrd: Voyager and Galileo. The World Wars, in this analogy, are like our rising concern with domestic problems — not soaring nationalism, luckily, but at least a deflection of those energies to local concerns.

Bruce Murray pointed out, in a speech published in *Space Policy*, Feb. 1991, that a science fictional alternate world scenario can perhaps illuminate our predicament. Think what our world would be like, he said, if the two-term limit on the presidency had not been enacted in the late 1940s. Franklin Roosevelt's four terms had provoked that change in the Constitution. The first president it applied to was Dwight Eisenhower. I remember how popular he was even in 1960. I'm pretty sure he could have beaten Kennedy, good grief, Nixon almost did.

Eisenhower would have presided over the whole early Space Age, 1957-64. He called space programs "pie in the sky," refused to fund research at a fast clip, and warned us against the "military-industrial complex".

In a parallel world with Eisenhower in office until 1964, we would have had no brave setting of the Apollo goal, no race to the moon.

"It was that close," Bruce said.

He thinks that by 1990 we would probably have seen some US-USSR muscle-flexing in near Earth orbit and probably a few unmanned probes would have studied the moon. No Grand Tour trajectory for Voyager, probably no Mariner to Mars or any of the rest of it. George Bush's 1989 speech might have been a stalwart call for a manned moon landing before the turn of the millennium.

Not impossible. I can scarcely argue that such a plausible, sensible space program was unlikely. After all, I had once written a story in which Robert Taft got the nomination in 1952, not Eisenhower. (And Taft's private choice for the vice presidency was one Senator McCarthy of Wisconsin...)

The plausibility of this imaginary history tells us that we have been very lucky. We lived through dramatic times, Sputnik-Apollo-Voyager, which quite probably will be seen as like Columbus-Magellan-Drake. Maybe we are now *getting back to normal*. And normal means, alas, dull.

The trick in using analogies and scenarios is knowing when to stop. How does our predicament differ from the past? We must play to those differences if we are to steer a better course than Destiny would give us.

Large space projects have fed off nationalism. Kennedy sold fears of Soviet technology, with an attractive patina of worry over our science education. This worked well — and I directly benefited, being a senior in high school in 1959, from the special science courses rushed into the schools; in fact, I might well not be a scientist today, were it not for the sudden spotlight cast on lowly high school physics courses.

Gerard K. O'Neill tried to hook up his giant solar power collecting satellites to the energy "crisis" of the 1970s, but of course the price of oil fell well before any such gargantuan project could get under way. [I never really believed in the O'Neill designs or strategy, and spent an entire dinner in a pricey restaurant trying to argue him out of the approach. He was sure that eventually energy prices would prove him right. When he died in 1992 he was still rather wistfully pushing the project.]

The paranoia road is necessarily short. Fears abate. Enemies topple. So it's time to face "Space as a Place" — a terrain to be studied and used in its own right, not as a sideshow battleground for earthly concerns.

We must also face the fact that *we've done the easy things*. Putting a pressurized Huygens probe on Titan, amid chilly winds and with many

more light-minutes of delay in getting radio orders through, will be a much tougher job than was landing Viking on Mars.

There are some signs of intelligent management. In January 1994 NASA launched Clementine, a bargain basement mission. It rose on a Titan II G rocket, recycled after spending 25 years in an Arkansas ICBM silo. It is a light, low-cost probe, using (and testing) sensors developed by the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, the heir to the Strategic Defense Initiative, a.k.a. "Star Wars." Clementine is state of the art with powerful laser-ranging device which can map our moon completely for the first time, then leave the moon and fly by an asteroid to within 100 kilometers, 1620 Geographos, about the time you read this.

Contrasting with the billion dollar Mars Observer, Clementine cost a mere 75 million. Plans for a second mission which will rendezvous with an asteroid and study it come in at about 30 million dollars. A small team put Clementine together in two years. Such savings point to the hard-nosed, realistic program we need.

Space must be made cheaper. Even Space Station Freedom, an orbiting pork barrel, is proving to be more than the congress can swallow. The present NASA Administrator,

Daniel Goldin, has negotiated with Russia to combine Freedom and Mir, their already orbiting station.

The reality of the mid-1990s seems to be that a go-it-alone station is not going to get funded by congress. A three-step plan appeals: first, send shuttle flights to the existing Mir for early experiments. Second, fly up US add-ons, so we get our own gear running. Third, collaborate on Mir II, a much fancier station, somewhere a decade or so hence. The trouble here is that shuttles can carry only light payloads into the high-latitude Mir orbit. We can't get by with this "workhorse" any longer. This opens the door to a new, better workhorse vehicle to come.

I suspect this is how matters will work out. US-Russian joint ventures contain the ominously large station costs, letting the rest of the space program go on with long-range plans that have some fiscal plausibility. Symbolizing the end of the Cold War, collaboration will also provide jobs for Russian engineers who might otherwise be working on North Korean or Libyan missile projects.

It would also lessen the load on the Shuttle. This is a time bomb in the belly of NASA, for its own internal studies show that the odds are about one in seventy-eight of a major accident, every time it flies. I served

on a study group assessing the Shuttle in the 1970s, and we calculated the odds rather higher — about four percent, or one flight in twenty-five. Regrettably, *Challenger* was right on the money. Then NASA became obsessed with hand-tuning every bolt on the craft, and now the odds are better.

But they will never be good. Rockets are not safe, period. The Titan failure rate is about three percent, and the Russian Protons do about the same. No rocket has ever done better over the long haul.

The schoolteachers-in-shuttles agenda, sold to the public for so long, came out of wanting to project the Eisenhower perspective — a go-slow Space Age, elbows tucked in, chin down, making no mistakes. How can we counter that?

First, appeal to the frontier. Young people, not just Americans, want to believe in an expansive sense of the future. More than consumerism and the Beavis & Butthead worldview. Our time needs heroes rather desperately. Notice how the media seize on the merest sign of character, such as Attorney General Janet Reno's accepting some blame for the errors of her underlings.

Political leaders are tuned to sense this better than scientists. That's why the emphasis on manned

space, which scientists like James Van Allen deplore because, after all, it is pricey and returns little for research folk to study. Man-in-space is a political event.

Actually, the general risk of rocketry plays to this. Danger equals drama. It would be a breath of fresh air if the President would simply tell the public that every launch is much more like a test pilot run, with casualties expected. No schoolteachers riding a bus into orbit. Instead, gutsy men and women on a wing and a prayer. As in *The Right Stuff*, "No Buck Rogers, no bucks."

We'll probably have a shuttle blowup before this decade is out, a fiery finish with grieving widows, and we might as well be prepared. Indeed, the deeper lesson we should drive home is that space will *never* be safe. Adventures aren't.

Second, we should have a clear set of cost-conscious reasons for every single project. Here the Antarctica analogy helps.

There are still solid national reasons for space. Nobody thought that there were good scientific uses to Antarctica when Scott and Amundsen raced across it. We didn't see that chilly clime as a laboratory peculiarly sensitive to the whole planetary system.

Now the "ozone hole" is a major

diagnostic of our planetary health, an early indicator of the depletion which is hard to measure globally, but gives itself away among the frozen crystals floating high above the poles.

The space analogy to this is "comparative planetology." We can learn basic information about how our system works by seeing the variants played out on Mars, Venus and elsewhere. These places can teach us much about the sensitivity of planets to the sun, to chemical components in their atmospheres, and much else. Clearly there is some connection between solar activity and climate, but we know little of how it works, much less how to make predictions. Mankind arose during the last great inter-glacial time, and another may be coming. What should we do about it?

The Martian polar caps contain layers going back to the Ice Ages of Earth. Was the main cause external to both planets—the sun? Or is there something more complicated going on, involving the atmospheres as primary players?

These questions are best answered by robots. They send back reams of data, grist for the scientists' mill—for people like me, who explore the solar system in their mind's eye. What about manned flight?

An old siren song might work

here: leadership in aerospace. Control of how to get into orbit. Further, dominance of the technologies which might be useful in future conflicts. This certainly means communication and surveillance satellites, but it probably implies some space station capability as well. Certainly, even big robotic expeditions to other worlds will take some assembly in orbit.

I doubt that robots can do that, though the answer is not obvious. Politically, the manned solution to orbital assembly might be preferred simply because the public will find it far more interesting than watching a cousin of R2D2 fitting pipes together in zero g.

Most space advocates have regrouped around a clear, seemingly inevitable goal: Mars. Mostly, I suspect, for its romance, mystery and the classic: because it's there. Of all manned projects—the space station, a moon base, even power satellites—it promises the *least*, Alan Steele argues, in economic or technological spinoff benefits. Probably true. But it's also the one goal which can quicken the pulse of the multitude.

I don't think anything on the space menu can satisfy a public longing for action with meaning nearly as well as Mars. It will be expensive and dangerous and we can all go, via TV.

But to even propose such a thing, as George Bush did, pushes quite a few problems to the top of any space agenda. Current blue-sky planning for Mars exploration assumes that we will use liquid rockets and take about a year each way. This means problems of human deterioration in zero g become major: calcium leaches from bones, muscles atrophy. Should we do studies of people inside spinning cans, to see if centrifugal effects will duplicate gravity in the physiological sense?

Maybe. Or perhaps we should look beyond chemical rockets. To fast ships which can get a small payload, of people plus a few weeks' rations, to Mars within a month. Their supplies could be pre-positioned, waiting in orbit at Mars. Nobody needs to leave until all their support gear is in place and working.

Of course, space station research in rotating living quarters has more human involvement, so it might be politically preferred. But the other major problem of a Mars expedition, really high reliability of all that gear, is best served by sending backup systems along long, slow, *cheap* orbits.

This underscores another need: really big rockets for getting considerable masses into Earth orbit. Or else, much better ways to do it — laser-driven systems, say.

All these are policy decisions, but they must be made in light of what humanity as a whole wants to see in space. Drama. People. Mystery. Wonder.

Perhaps manned presences should be seen now as intrinsically international, because we desperately need goals as big as the human prospect. The world needs lofty aims. Space buffs love their iconography — the drama of liftoff, of horizons brimming with the unknown, of Voyagers serenely gliding above alien landscapes. As well, they have an answer to those who say that these are simply the distractions of a high culture, perched atop a seething, oppressed mass.

The industrial nations have about twenty percent of the world's population. The bulk of humanity labors long and hard for little. Not because the advanced nations steal their wealth — that same twenty percent produces two thirds of the world's output, including agriculture — but because most of the world has never learned the many social and intellectual abilities which produce wealth.

We will probably have no real peace in the world until most of humanity is somewhat prosperous, or at least has solid hope of becoming so. But if they pursue the agenda of

the industrial nations, the strain on raw resources will be vast. So, too, will be the pollution from more mining, metal smelting, fossil fuel burning, irrigation and the like. The planet simply can't support it, not with present technology.

The energy and mass needed for uplifting humanity must come from elsewhere — space. And it is quite foolish, in the long run, for us to do messy, polluting things in this thin

shell of vulnerable air and water which gave birth to us all.

We're fouling our nest. But a smart bird learns to fly.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: molsen@vmsa.oac.uci.edu



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Don Webb lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife Rosemary. His short fiction has appeared in many venues, including The Best of Pulphouse and Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. He is one of the unique voices working in our field.

About "The Evil Miracle," he writes, "An old cowboy, meaning a real working cowboy, showed me how to catch tarantulas with bubblegum near the Amarillo Helium Plant about a mile from the motel which is the model for the Starlight." From this unusual beginning comes an even more unusual tale of lost loves, lost dreams, and spiders.

The Evil Miracle

By Don Webb

MARTHA WILLS MADE THE down payment on the Starlight Motel in 1966 in memory of her only love. Now in 1992 she is sixty-seven and wonder-

ing if there is a chance of selling it in a terrible real estate market. And there are the spiders.

The tarantulas — big furry black ones — had always been a problem. Just one of them padding across the asphalt would bring a Yankee tourist screaming for his (or more likely his family's) life. Across the highway the old prairie dog town was full of 'em, and they became quite frisky in the warm weather. Martha knew them as harmless. You damn near had to step on one to get him to bite you. As a child she and her brother Billy used to fish 'em out of holes with bubble gum. You'd get your well-chewed bubble-gum — long, dangly, and pink — and you'd lower the string into a prairie dog hole. You'd pull up a tarantula and swing 'em round — sort of a living hairy yo-yo. Tourists didn't relate well to this story. Next were the garden spiders. Black-and-white wonders of the spider world, they could've been designed by

Picasso. They spun huge webs to glisten rose window-like with the morning dew. Usually she'd have one on the roses out front and one in the bear grass out back. But this year they were everywhere — linking guests' cars with their sticky floss, obscuring doorways, filling the aluminum steps which led to the diving board of her pool. Martha had taken to getting up at dawn and dewebbing the place.

Finally there were the brown recluses. A different matter. They were one of the truly poisonous species. The bite could be fatal. Martha's cousin was once bitten. The tissues of his leg turned black and smelled of rot. When — months later — Robert had healed, he was missing a handful of leg. The tiny brown recluse *likes* to sleep in shoes and other tight places. Martha had found six in the twenty-seven years she owned the Starlight. Three of the six she had found last month. She figured that the spider increase was somehow due to pesticide use. She'd half-slept through a TV movie with that theme. She didn't tell anyone about the spiders. She didn't want rumors to start. Brown recluses could kill. In the days when the Starlight catered to an interstate tourist trade, a death would have meant nothing. Somebody from New York/Ontario/Alabama had died. So what? Who cares? But the small patronage the Starlight now enjoyed was connected to the hospital. Her clients were the families of the patients. They came in from nearby little towns and left after cures, deaths, or loss of hope. But they recommended the Starlight to their plagued neighbors. Cheap and clean, they said, in walking distance of the hospital and the McDonald's. One death from spiders — or even the notion that such a death was likely — would close the Starlight by the same word of mouth that kept it open.

Martha hadn't told her niece or her nephews that she was going to sell the Starlight. If she told them — she'd have to do it. 'Cause she's that way. Women don't make it in the business world if they appear indecisive. It was like Mr. Rheims said, you have to have fire in your heart and ice in your veins. Mr. Rheims represented the appearance of love to her. Perhaps she even loved him. His name was John.

It was early in the morning and the maids hadn't arrived. Martha turned on the lawn sprinklers. Just so. Any more and people's cars would get wet, any less and the grass wouldn't. She said good morning to Mrs. Abrams, who was already on her way to sit in the ICU waiting room. Promised her that she'd pray for Mr. Abrams. She removed the web across the office door and

went inside to make her first pot of decaf.

Across the quiet highway she noticed one of her guests doing something very strange.

The fellow had checked in over a week ago. Martha had been preparing for bed — the Starlight hadn't had a night clerk in three years — when someone hit the buzzer in front. Wearing her peach-colored fuzzy bathrobe, she had checked him in. He wore this khaki outfit, if he had had a pith helmet, she would've sworn he was on safari. He had known her name.

"You're Martha Wills, right? That's what I was told, Martha Wills."

It was late and she hadn't asked who or why, but she wondered. Folks always talk about the Starlight, never about Martha. She didn't think anyone had mentioned her by name since she won \$100 by being the ten thousandth customer at a Food King.

But the strange man in khaki — what was his name? — was picking up bits of spider web with tweezers. He was putting the webs in some kind of tiny glass test tube. One strand per tube. He capped each tube with a black rubber stopper, then carefully put the tubes into a case specially fitted to hold them.

Her secret was out. This was some kind of scientist here to study the spiders. Her heart sped up. Her doctor had told her to avoid excitement and coffee. Her heart sped up and this scared her. It was almost a pain to feel this feeling in her chest.

She gripped the smooth wooden counter with the thumb and index finger of her left hand. She could feel her pulse through her fingertip. She would have to relax — have to use the method she learned at Amarillo Community College. Relax, now, relax. Relax between each beat. When she felt calm, she looked at the tar-brown nail of her thumb and wished for the millionth time she could give up smoking.

She couldn't see the strange man from the window of the motel office.

His name was Olin Fletcher, and immediately it became Dr. Fletcher in her mind.

She decided to call a realtor that afternoon. The realtor came along with a photographer. He shot the Starlight from several angles while his boss drank iced tea with Martha. They agreed on the truths and lies that could be used to sell the motel. The realtor cautioned her against any kind of For Sale sign. That almost always scared away guests. In fact, Martha might want to run

some undetectable promotion to fill up the units. The realtor couldn't promise a sale—it was a slow market—but if Martha could wait six to twelve months, the realtor was willing to work with her. Then the realtor mentioned a figure. It was twenty thousand more than Martha was even hoping for. She should've come to this decision long ago. The realtor also told Martha that the housing market was worse, and when the time came to move from the Starlight she was sure she could find Martha an affordable house in town.

Move from the Starlight. She hadn't quite figured that part yet. Damn Dr. Fletcher.

She served the realtor some carrot cake. She bought it from a shop in town and carefully put it on her grandmother's green platter. Everyone thought it was her own. She pushed her gold-rimmed spectacles up the slope of her sweat-shiny nose. She looked outside and saw that Dr. Fletcher was pestering the photographer. Fletcher had finally donned a pith helmet. What did he think he was — on safari? Trying to talk the photographer into shooting some footage of the quaint aboriginal motel? Please, God, don't let him say anything.

She'd lost track of what the realtor was saying, and now the realtor was leaving, and she hoped she didn't look like a senile fool. Dammit she wasn't old. She was just distracted. She'd always been distracted by the Starlight.

The realtor and the photographer left. Martha heard the doors slamming shut on their white station wagon — the sound of gravel as they sped off in the dry Texas heat. She wondered if she had agreed to anything. This was the worst it had ever been. She was letting words make solid life decisions for her and she didn't even know what the words were. She'd let her life drift into this state of disconnectedness. She was worse off than the Starlight. Both were real only in the past, sharing the fate of ruins — sagging shapes and spiders.

She would put a few things right, though, and one of them would be Dr. Fletcher.

Her chance came two days later. Fletcher stood in front of the Starlight on the tiny strip of Bermuda grass that separated the asphalt of the parking lot from the asphalt of the highway. He admired the burnt orange sunset broken by the Spanish tile roof of the Veterans Hospital. He must have heard her

walk up behind him for at the perfect moment he waved his right arm to the sky and said, "It looks like an opened paradise."

She almost fell backwards, because the same words had been said to her twenty-seven years before. Her blood must've collected in her feet, which suddenly seemed made of lead, and her voice must've gone there too for when she spoke she had to lift each word against the gravity of the whole earth. "How poetic," she said, and thought it was the most stupid and flat thing she had ever said in her life — save for when she had said those same words twenty-seven years before. And then it had been worse because she had said them to a man whom she had just fallen in love with. A Miata whizzed by with its bass so loud she could feel it in her hollow chest. She looked hard at this strange man in the safari suit. It *couldn't* be the same man. He had his height, but it couldn't be the same man. It couldn't be the same man, because this man brought fear and disappointment and the other had brought love and hope. It was a terrible thing to be an innkeeper because your guests were always bringing you emotions from their strange, far-off lands.

"You think so?" he said. "I'm a lonely man and lonely men are given to poetry."

She would break the pattern. She would say something different. She had to remember. Ah! she knew — comment on something new.

"I like the way the orange light shines on the metal of the new water tower," she said. It was awkward as hell, but at least it was original.

He looked at her with his little green eyes filled with hate. She knew she had stopped him at some game he was playing, but she wasn't sure that she had done a good thing.

"The man taking pictures told me that you were going to sell this place."

"Are you interested in buying it?" *I wouldn't sell it to you for a ka-zillion dollars*, she thought.

"Me. No. Even as interesting a site as it is." He shook his head. "It would tie me down too much."

He turned to face the Starlight, and she automatically turned as well. Together they began walking toward the office.

"Could I get you something? A Coke? I like to do special things for my customers who stay for weeks." She would find out his game.

"Not yet," he said. "Not yet."

And before she could say anything else, she saw Mrs. Abrams walking

like a wooden zombie. Her cheeks were shiny with tears. Martha remembered that she hadn't prayed for Mr. Abrams. She went toward the grieving woman, immersed in her real life's work. It was only much later after she had literally tucked Mrs. Abrams into bed that she thought of the meaning of "Not yet, not yet."

MARTHA'S RELATIVES came the next day and it was like a funeral.

She had called them at eleven o'clock in the morning — her nephews Bill, at his dry cleaning shop, and Ralph, at the Frame-It-Yourself in the mall; and her niece Sarah, at the Credit Bureau. Apparently the three of them had decided among themselves that if Aunt Martha ever sold the Starlight, she must be in bad health and soon to die. Or at least soon to be a burden. Sarah, along with the two nephews, drove up in her slate-blue Ford Escort. They stayed inside the car for a few minutes talking among themselves. Martha watched them through the office's bay window.

When they came in they talked too loud as though she was deaf. They were overly solicitous. They kept telling her to sit down and not to fuss. Sarah's mouth said that Aunt Martha could come live with her, although Sarah's eyes said she would rather go to the dentist seven thousand times instead. Bill and Ralph were full of information on the wonderful retirement communities the city had to offer. It seemed that there was the place that began as a sort of apartment — "Just like being a guest at the Starlight" — and then as she deteriorated she could be eased into nursing home-type care. A simple gentle process perfectly tied with the dimming of the light.

She told them that she was getting her own house. A house away from them. They could just leave. And she cried and they left.

This had never happened before.

She had just called them out of courtesy; they had no place in her life. If John hadn't left. No.

She had been with him a month in 1966. He had brought her love and mystery and magic. She'd been a maid then and the Starlight a more prosperous establishment living on the lifeblood of Route 66. He had changed her life so much that she knew she would have to hold onto this place.

He had told her that a certain kind of man meets a certain kind of woman and both are changed by the experience. This can happen at the most unlikely places, but at likely times. There is a time when a man has reached a certain stage of his personal development — that only a certain woman could excite love, imagination, and will.

And for that woman, of course, there was only that certain man.

After they had known each other for a week (and had only made love once), he took her to a used book store and bought her a copy of Goethe's *Faust*. He read to her about Gretchen — not at the beginning of the play, but at the end. When Faust's damnation is near — when he has pushed his powers and knowledge to the max and only Hell awaits. Yet Gretchen's prayers open Heaven's gate for him. Her love and constant devotion translate him to a state of glory and knowledge of God.

But Faust abandoned Gretchen, she had said.

"He did what he had to do," he said. "He stuck to his quest."

"But he was evil," she said.

"He sought knowledge and power. Is that evil? Perhaps it's just breaking the human horizons. Galileo was evil when he moved the center of the universe from the earth to the sun. From that understanding we have the space program. Someday we'll even have a man on the moon. Is it evil to want knowledge and power? We send our kids to college so they can get an education and a good job. Our nation is full of tiny Fausts, but we have forgotten the importance of love in the equation."

He had said many strange and wonderful things and she knew how Eve felt listening to the Serpent in the Garden. Early on she realized that he would someday abandon her. She didn't think it would matter. Although she had never known love before — she had known sex and she had known friendship — she thought that knowing how to love is enough. She would take that knowing and use it on an appropriate man. None of these mystery men stopping in for love and magic. She had tried. After that morning when she woke up alone, and realized that it was really so — she tried. She tried finding other men — men whose place was inside the city. She tried with men she met through singles bars, churches, adult educational programs. There were wild times, fast times, hard times but no love.

She tried to forget about John Rheims. But everything that called to love, the love songs on the radio, a dingy Valentine card found in the street, the sun

in the sky, put John's face in her mind.

Had it really been love? Could there have been love in such a short time? And if he really felt the way she did, could he have left her? These questions were with her always.

Three months after John's departure, she won a magazine distributor's sweepstakes. She bought the Starlight from her boss, who was able to fulfill his lifelong dream of retiring to the Hamptons. While he contemplated the cold North Atlantic, she read detective novels and tried their methods at the scene of the crime.

For the first three years she was too busy to do anything except hope for his imminent return. The address in the register proved to be false, but she hoped that he would prove true. For the next three years she took to asking traveling salesmen and professional vagabonds if they'd ever met anyone like John. Then she bought the property next door — put in sixteen more units and a restaurant, and for six years she made money hand over fist. She worked all the time and didn't think much. She invested her money wisely. When her brother drank himself to death, she was able to send her nephews and niece to college. Good colleges, too. A few months before her establishment was totally bypassed by the new business loop, she sold the restaurant and the sixteen units to her competitor next door.

The kids came back from college and six quiet years passed. She developed herself. She learned to paint. She took night classes at the community college. She hired herself three assistant managers and she permitted herself a couple of vacations. She woke up one morning and was surprised to see her mother in the mirror — so she stopped looking for love. It just wasn't dignified somehow. These were the years of the secret. She told no one of John, and if anyone remembered the name she advised them she was well over that. She thought that if she spoke not — the memory would lessen. Yet by hiding the secret in silence — it grew ever stronger until it became the driver of her life.

During the eight years that followed, as the Starlight began its decline, Martha pulled her money out. She never let the place get run down or shabby — after all, she lived there and one should take care of one's own environment. But she let some of the staff go, she put more of her own salary into T-bills, she created the economic means to live out her life.

She had been thirty-nine when she met John. Now she was sixty-six. She

was still surprised when she qualified for a senior discount. Someone would die in a dramatic fashion, and on the news they would say, "an elderly woman." And Martha would find out that the woman was her age. Several friends from her high school class had shown up in the obituaries.

She should have had the answers by now. Instead, terrifying events were threatening the order she took for granted.

She didn't sleep.

Her arthritis was bad.

She felt somewhat better after a long hot shower. She wanted to confront Dr. Fletcher at dawn — or as soon thereafter as she could.

She knocked on his door at 6:50. She knew she was waking up other guests, but she plain didn't care. She knocked, waited, knocked, waited, and put her pass key in the lock. Just as she turned the key a *chittering* noise came from within. Her nerve failed. Dr. Fletcher said, "Later, Ms. Wills, later." She went back to her room and threw up.

There was someone in the office wanting to check out — pissed off by the early morning knocking. Martha Wills' reflection was pale and sweaty in the office window.

The day was long and she didn't eat anything. At sunset she ventured outside. He was standing on the strip of grass between the parking lot and the old highway again. She was weak and kept falling in and out of visions from her past. Whatever unknown lodestone drew her to this meeting, it had overcome her will. Fletcher raised his arm to the magnificent sunset. "It looks like an opened paradise."

"How poetic," she said.

"I'm a lonely man and lonely men are given to poetry," he said.

"It seems that poetry should attract the perfect audience."

Fletcher turned to her and said, "Now, Martha Wills, now. We have said the words and you know and believe that these words are not said here and now by accident."

"I know and believe," she said, and suddenly everything had that slow-moving clarity of a dream.

They walked back to his room. She sat on the green vinyl chair and he took a small brass jar from his suitcase on the dresser. The jar was simple and unadorned. It looked like an old-fashioned jelly jar save for its material. It

seemed very old. He unscrewed the jar, it made a noise like a scratchy seventy-eight on her grandmother's Victrola. The noise was John Rheim's voice. He said, "You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"I know," she said.

"The jar," said Dr. Fletcher, "always makes those sounds. I found it ten years ago in a market in Marrakesh. I've spent ten years trying to find out what it means. I can't tell you the number of nights I've spent turning the lid again and again. To find why the jar said these things, I studied phonics, statistics — at first it was a hobby. Then an obsession. Eventually I had to learn the hidden lore of mankind, and I can tell you that it is a good thing that many things are hidden."

"So you found out about John and me," she said. "Let me ask you something. Do you love your little jar?"

"It tortures, it tantalizes. For a while I thought I loved it, but what it woke up in me is curiosity. All of the strange and beautiful things in my life came from my quest. Even now I don't know what's in the jar. It won't open. The recording principle is simple — the technology is mysterious because of reasons of metallurgy. I've had offers of thousands of dollars from material scientists for my jar. So do you know what the words mean?"

"I know," she said. "But you haven't told me about the spiders."

"They always show up," he said. "They're always waiting when I get to a place. I don't know how the spiders fit in. They're another piece of the puzzle; so what do the words mean?"

For the first time she saw another human being in Fletcher. His green eyes were alive with want. This was someone who was like herself.

"I know," she said. "But you must tell me where John is. I think I even understand the spiders."

"I don't know. A magician of Marrakesh, who lived in an artificial cave beneath the city, recognized the voice. He said that it belonged to someone who stood outside the circles of time — a voice sometimes heard in the wind at the sacred sites of the most ancient cities. What does he want?"

"He wants my forgiveness."

"Will you give it to him?"

"He is a devil, an evil man. He revolted against God, having to know everything. But I learned love from him and not from God."

"I learned curiosity from him. I had to track down hundreds of people

to reconstruct your first meeting."

"Play the message again," she said.

He spun the lid on the small brass jar. "You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"And the lid never comes off?"

"Just round and round. I'd thought of removing it by force, but I might destroy the very mystery I'm seeking to answer."

Martha pulled herself up in her chair. She sat in a very dignified manner with her hands on her lap. "Play the message again."

"You know, Martha, I only want one thing."

"I forgive you for leaving me, John, and I hope you have found what you sought."

There was a slight metallic *ping!* from the jar. Fletcher started to twist at the lid, but stopped himself. He had been so long apart from his mystery, his beloved, and he had to force himself to stay separate. He managed to ask, "You said you knew about the spiders."

"I had forgotten. I don't know how I had forgotten this with months of spiders showing up to change my life. John has reached out to change my life again. I guess I'm ready for retirement. I guess I'd been waiting to say the words, too. He used spiders as a metaphor for his Work. He said that spiders were perfect Faustian creatures. They make their own worlds out of the material in their black hearts. Each is its own god; I objected to the metaphor. I told him that God had foreordained each spider to weave its web. Those perfect patterns of symmetry that catch the morning sun are examples of God's will. He said, I'll show you some real magic sometime. I'll get spiders to make something other than a preordained web."

Fletcher gave the lid another turn. It came off. The jar was empty, but the room was suddenly filled with the fragrance of roses.

Then from beneath the bed, from behind the curtains, from underneath the crack of the door — they came. Spiders. Thousands, maybe millions of them. Fletcher dropped the jar and they scurried over to it. The jar was soon covered.

The swarming mass was organizing. Tarantulas at the bottom, garden spiders in the middle, brown recluses at the top. The mass split into three almost perfect balls, one atop the other.

Fletcher looked at Martha and Martha looked at Fletcher.

There weren't any more spiders coming in.

Martha rose. The spider snowman stood a foot taller than she. She walked to it, and after a moment of dreadful deliberation — stuck her left hand into the center of the garden spider ball. It felt lacy and dry inside — like sticking her hand into a pile of feathers. She felt around — seeking the jar, which she presumed to be in the center. Her fingers found something long and smooth. At first she thought it was a pencil. As she grabbed it her index finger was pricked by something sharp — or maybe a spider had bitten her. She pulled it out carefully.

In her left hand she held a single perfect black rose.



"You'll be back."

Elizabeth Hand wrote one of most controversial stories we published last year, "Justice," which appeared in our July, 1993, issue. She calls "Last Summer at Mars Hill" a heartwarmer written to keep her karma good.

Liz's novels Winterlong and Aestival Tide were both finalists for the Philip K. Dick award. Last summer Bantam Books published Icarus Descending and will publish Waking the Moon later this year.

Last Summer at Mars Hill

By Elizabeth Hand

EVEN BEFORE THEY LEFT home, Moony knew her mother wouldn't return from Mars Hill that year. Jason had called her from his father's house in

San Francisco —

"I had a dream about you last night," he'd said, his voice cracking the way it did when he was excited. "We were at Mars Hill, and my father was there, and my mother, too — I knew it was a dream, like can you imagine my mother at Mars Hill? — and you had on this sort of long black dress and you were sitting alone by the pier. And you said, 'This is it, Jason. We'll never see this again.' I felt like crying, I tried to hug you but my father pulled me back. And then I woke up."

She didn't say anything. Finally Jason prodded her. "Weird, huh, Moony? I mean, don't you think it's weird?"

She shrugged and rolled her eyes, then sighed loudly so that he'd be able to tell she was upset. "Thanks, Jason. Like that's supposed to cheer me up?"

A long silence, then Jason's breathless voice again. "Shit,

Moony, I'm sorry. I didn't — "

She laughed, a little nervously, and said, "Forget it. So when you flying out to Maine?"

Nobody but Jason called her Moony, not at home at least, not in Kamensic Village. There she was Maggie Rheining, which was the name that appeared under her junior picture in the high school yearbook.

But the name that had been neatly typed on the birth certificate in San Francisco sixteen years ago, the name Jason and everyone at Mars Hill knew her by, was Shadowmoon Starlight Rising. Maggie would have shaved her head before she'd admit her real name to anyone at school. At Mars Hill it wasn't so weird: there was Adele Grose, known professionally as Madame Olaf; Shasta Daisy O'Hare and Rvis Capricorn; Martin Dionysos, who was Jason's father; and Ariel Rising, née Amanda Mae Rheining, who was Moony's mother. For most of the year Moony and Ariel lived in Kamensic Village, the affluent New York exurb where her mother ran Earthly Delights Catering and Moony attended high school, and everything was pretty much normal. It was only in June that they headed north to Maine, to the tiny spiritualist community where they had summered for as long as Moony could remember. And even though she could have stayed in Kamensic with Ariel's friends the Loomises, at the last minute (and due in large part to Jason's urging, and threats if she abandoned him there) she decided to go with her mother to Mars Hill. Later, whenever she thought how close she'd come to not going, it made her feel sick: as though she'd missed a flight and later found out the plane had crashed.

Because much as she loved it, Moony had always been a little ashamed of Mars Hill. It was such a dinky place, plopped in the middle of nowhere on the rocky Maine coast — tiny shingle-style Carpenter Gothic cottages, all tumbled into disrepair, their elaborate trim rotting and strung with spiderwebs; poppies and lupines and tiger lilies sprawling bravely atop clumps of chickweed and dandelions of truly monstrous size; even the sign by the pier so faded you almost couldn't read the earnest lettering:

MARS HILL
SPIRITUALIST COMMUNITY
FOUNDED 1883

"Why doesn't your father take somebody's violet aura and repaint the damn sign with it?" she'd exploded once to Jason.

Jason looked surprised. "I kind of like it like that," he said, shaking the hair from his face and tossing a sea urchin at the silvered board. "It looks like it was put up by our Founding Mothers." But for years Moony almost couldn't stand to even look at the sign, it embarrassed her so much.

It was Jason who helped her get over that. They'd met when they were both twelve. It was the summer that Ariel started the workshop in Creative Psychokinesis, the first summer that Jason and his father had stayed at Mars Hill.

"Hey," Jason had said, too loudly, when they found themselves left alone while the adults swapped wine coolers and introductions at the summer's first barbecue. They were the only kids in sight. There were no other families and few conventionally married couples at Mars Hill. The community had been the cause of more than one custody battle that had ended with wistful children sent to spend the summer with a more respectable parent in Boston or Manhattan or Bar Harbor. "That lady there with my father — "

He stuck his thumb out to indicate Ariel, her long black hair frizzed and bound with leather thongs, an old multicolored skirt flapping around her legs. She was talking to a slender man with close-cropped blond hair and goatee, wearing a sky-blue caftan and shabby Birkenstock sandals. "That your mom?"

"Yeah." Moony shrugged and glanced at the man in the caftan. He and Ariel both turned to look at their children. The man grinned and raised his wine glass. Ariel did a little pirouette and blew a kiss at Moony.

"Looks like she did too much of the brown acid at Woodstock," Jason announced, and flopped onto the grass. Moony glared down at him.

"She wasn't at Woodstock, asshole," she said, and had started to walk away when the boy called after her.

"Hey — it's a joke! My name's Jason — " He pointed at the man with Ariel. "That's my father. Martin Dionysos. But like that's not his real name, okay? His real name is Schuster but he changed it, but I'm Jason Schuster. He's a painter. We don't know anyone here. I mean, does it ever get above forty degrees?"

He scrambled to his feet and looked at her beseechingly. Smaller even than Moony herself, so slender he should have looked younger than her,

except that his sharp face beneath floppy white-blond hair was always twisted into some ironic pronouncement, his blue eyes always flickering somewhere between derision and pleading.

"No," Moony said slowly. The part about Jason not changing his name got to her. She stared pointedly at his thin arms prickled with gooseflesh, the fashionable surfer-logo T-shirt that hung nearly to his knees. "You're gonna freeze your skinny ass off here in Maine, Jason Schuster." And she grinned.

He was from San Francisco. His father was a well-known artist and a member of the Raging Faery Queens, a gay pagan group that lived in the Bay Area and staged elaborately beautiful solstice gatherings and AIDS benefits. At Mars Hill, Martin Dionysos gave workshops on strengthening your aura and on clear nights led the community's men in chanting at the moon as it rose above Penobscot Bay. Jason was so diffident about his father and his father's work that Moony was surprised, the single time she visited him on the West Coast, to find her friend's room plastered with flyers advertising Faery gatherings and newspaper photos of Martin and Jason at various ACT-UP events. In the fall Jason would be staying in Maine, while she returned to high school. Ultimately it was the thought that she might not see him again that made Moony decide to spend this last summer at Mars Hill.

"That's what you're wearing to First Night?"

Moony started at her mother's voice, turned to see Ariel in the middle of the summer cottage's tiny living room. Wine rocked back and forth in her mother's glass, gold shot with tiny sunbursts from the crystals hung from every window. "What about your new dress?"

Moony shrugged. She couldn't tell her mother about Jason's dream, about the black dress he'd seen her wearing. Ariel set great store by dreams, especially these last few months. What she'd make of one in which Moony appeared in a black dress and Ariel didn't appear at all, Moony didn't want to know.

"Too hot," Moony said. She paused in front of the window and adjusted one of three silver crosses dangling from her right ear. "Plus I don't want to upstage you."

Ariel smiled. "Smart kid," she said, and took another sip of her wine.

Ariel wore what she wore to every First Night: an ankle-length patchwork skirt so worn and frayed it could only be taken out once a year, on this ceremonial occasion. Squares of velvet and threadbare satin were embla-

zoned with suns and moons and astrological symbols, each one with a date neatly embroidered in crimson thread.

Sedona, Aug 15 1972. Mystery Hill, NH, 5/80. The Winter Garden 1969. Jajouka, Tangiers, Marrakech 1968.

Along the bottom, where many of the original squares had disintegrated into fine webs of denim and chambray, she had begun piecing a new section: squares that each held a pair of dates, a name, an embroidered flower. These were for friends who had died. Some of them were people lost two decades earlier, to the War, or drugs or misadventure; names that Moony knew only from stories told year after year at Mars Hill or in the kitchen at home.

But most of the names were those of people Moony herself had known. Friends of Ariel's who had gathered during the divorce, and again, later, when Moony's father died, and during the myriad affairs and breakups that followed. Men and women who had started out as Ariel's customers and ended as family. Uncle Bob and Uncle Raymond and Uncle Nigel. Laurie Salas. Tommy McElroy and Sean Jacobson. Chas Bowen and Martina Glass. And, on the very bottom edge of the skirt, a square still peacock-bright with its blood-colored rose, crimson letters spelling out John's name and a date the previous spring.

As a child Moony had loved that skirt. She loved to watch her mother sashay into the tiny gazebo at Mars Hill on First Night and see all the others laugh and run to her, their fingers plucking at the patchwork folds as though to read something there, tomorrow's weather perhaps, or the names of suitors yet unmet.

But now Moony hated the skirt. It was morbid, even Jason agreed with that.

"They've already got a fucking quilt," he said, bitterly. "We don't need your mom wearing a goddamn skirt."

Moony nodded, miserable, and tried not to think of what they were most afraid of: Martin's name there beside John's, and a little rosebud done in flower-knots. Martin's name, or Ariel's.

There was a key to the skirt, Moony thought as she watched her mother sip her wine, a way to decode all the arcane symbols Ariel had stitched there over the last few months. It lay in a heavy manila envelope somewhere in Ariel's room, an envelope that Ariel had started carrying with her in February, and which grew heavier and heavier as the weeks passed. Moony knew there

was something horrible in that envelope, something to do with the countless appointments Ariel had had since February, with the whispered phone calls and macrobiotic diets and the resurgence of her mother's belief in *devas* and earth spirits and plain old-fashioned ghosts.

But Moony said nothing of this, only smiled and fidgeted with her earrings. "Go ahead," she told Ariel, who had settled at the edge of a wicker hassock and peered up at her daughter through her wineglass. "I just got to get some stuff."

Ariel waited in silence, then drained her glass and set it on the floor. "Okay. Jason and Martin are here. I saw them on the hill — "

"Yeah. I know, I talked to them, they went to Camden for lunch, they can't wait to see you." Moony paced to the door to her room, trying not to look impatient. Already her heart was pounding.

"Okay," Ariel said again. She sounded breathless and a little drunk. She had ringed her aquamarine eyes with kohl, to hide how tired she was. Over the last few months she'd grown so thin that her cheekbones had emerged again, after years of hiding in her round peasant's face. Her voice was hoarse as she asked, "So you'll be there soon?"

Moony nodded. She curled a long tendril of hair, dark as her mother's but finer, and brushed her cheek with it. "I'm just gonna pull my hair back. Jason'll give me shit if I don't."

Ariel laughed. Jason thought that they were all a bunch of hippies. "Okay." She crossed the room unsteadily, touching the backs of chairs, a windowsill, the edge of a buoy hanging from the wall. When the screen door banged shut behind her Moony sighed with relief.

For a few minutes she waited, to make sure her mother hadn't forgotten something, like maybe a joint or another glass of wine. She could see out the window to where people were starting downhill toward the gazebo. If you didn't look too closely, they might have been any group of summer people gathering for a party in the long northern afternoon.

But after a minute or two their oddities started to show. You saw them for what they really were: men and women just getting used to a peculiar middle age. They all had hair a little too long or too short, a little too gray or garishly colored. The women, like Ariel, wrapped in clothes like banners from a triumphant campaign now forgotten. Velvet tunics threaded with silver, miniskirts crossing pale bare blue-veined thighs, Pucci blouses back in

vogue again. The men more subdued, in chinos some of them, or old jeans that were a little too bright and neatly pressed. She could see Martin beneath the lilacs by the gazebo, in baggy psychedelic shorts and T-shirt, his gray-blond hair longer than it had been and pulled back into a wispy ponytail. Beside him Jason leaned against a tree, self-consciously casual, smoking a cigarette as he watched the First Night promenade. At sight of Ariel he raised one hand in a lazy wave.

And now the last two stragglers reached the bottom of the hill. Mrs. Grose carrying her familiar, an arthritic wheezing pug named Milton: Ancient Mrs. Grose, who smelled of Sen-sen and whiskey, and prided herself on being one of the spiritualists exposed as a fraud by Houdini. And Gary Bonetti, who (the story went) five years ago had seen a vision of his own death in the City, a knife wielded by a crack-crazed kid in Washington Heights. Since then, he had stayed on at Mars Hill with Mrs. Grose, the community's only other year-round resident.

Moony ducked back from the window as her mother turned to stare up at the cottage. She waited until Ariel looked away again, as Martin and Jason beckoned her toward the gazebo.

"Okay," Moony whispered. She took a step across the room and stopped. An overwhelming smell of cigarette smoke suddenly filled the air, though there was no smoke to be seen. She coughed, waving her hand in front of her face.

"Damn it, Jason," she hissed beneath her breath. The smell was gone as abruptly as it had appeared. "I'll be *right there* — "

She slipped through the narrow hallway with its old silver-touched mirrors and faded Maxfield Parrish prints, and went into Ariel's room. It still had its beginning-of-summer smell, mothballs and the salt sweetness of rugosa roses blooming at the beach's edge. The old chenille bedspread was rumpled where Ariel had lain upon it, exhausted by the flight from LaGuardia to Boston, from Boston via puddlejumper to the tiny airport at Green Turtle Reach. Moony pressed her hand upon the spread and closed her eyes. She tried to focus as Jason had taught her, tried to dredge up the image of her mother stretched upon the bed. And suddenly there it was, a faint sharp stab of pain in her left breast, like a stitch in her side from running. She opened her eyes quickly, fighting the dizziness and panicky feeling. Then she went to the bureau.

At home she had never been able to find the envelope. It was always hidden away, just as the mail was always carefully sorted, the messages on the answering machine erased before she could get to them. But now it was as if Ariel had finally given up on hiding. The envelope was in the middle drawer, a worn cotton camisole draped halfheartedly across it. Moony took it carefully from the drawer and went to the bed, sat and slowly fanned the papers out.

They were hospital bills. Hospital bills and Blue Cross forms, cash register receipts for vitamins from the Waverly Drugstore with Ariel's crabbed script across the top. The bills were for tests only, tests and consultations. Nothing for treatments, no receipts for medication other than vitamins. At the bottom of the envelope, rolled into a blue cylinder and tightened with a rubber band, she found the test results. Stray words floated in the air in front of her as Moony drew in a long shuddering breath.

Mammography results. Sectional biopsy. Fourth stage malignancy. Metastasized.

Cancer. Her mother had breast cancer.

"Shit," she said. Her hands after she replaced the papers were shaking. From outside echoed summer music, and she could hear voices — her mother's, Diana's, Gary Bonetti's deep bass — shouting above the tinny sound of a cassette player —

*"Wouldn't it be nice if we could wake up
In the kind of world where we belong?"*

YOU BITCH," Moony whispered. She stood at the front window and stared down the hill at the gazebo, her hands clamped beneath her armpits to keep them still. Her face was streaked with tears. "When were you going to tell me, when were you going to fucking tell me?"

At the foot of Mars Hill, alone by a patch of daylilies stood Jason, staring back up at the cottage. A cigarette burned between his fingers, its scent miraculously filling the little room. Even from here Moony could tell that somehow and of course, he already knew.

Everyone had a hangover the next morning, not excluding Moony and

Jason. In spite of that the two met in the community chapel. Jason brought a thermos of coffee, bright red and yellow dinosaurs stenciled on its sides, and blew ashes from the bench so she could sit down.

"You shouldn't smoke in here." Moony coughed and slumped beside him. Jason shrugged and stubbed out his cigarette, fished in his pocket and held out his open palm.

"Here. Ibuprofen and valerian capsules. And there's bourbon in the coffee."

Moony snorted but took the pills, shooting back a mouthful of tepid coffee and grimacing.

"Hair of the iguana," Jason said. "So really, Moony, you didn't know?"

"How the hell would I know?" Moony said wearily. "I mean, I knew it was *something* —"

She glanced sideways at her friend. His slender legs were crossed at the ankles and he was barefoot. Already dozens of mosquito bites pried his arms and legs. He was staring at the little altar in the center of the room. He looked paler than usual, more tired, but that was probably just the hangover.

From outside, the chapel looked like all the other buildings at Mars Hill, faded gray shingles and white trim. Inside there was one large open room, with benches arranged in a circle around the walls, facing in to the plain altar. The altar was heaped with wilting day lilies and lilacs, an empty bottle of chardonnay and a crumpled pack of Kents — Jason's brand — and a black velvet hair ribbon that Moony recognized as her mother's. Beneath the ribbon was an old snapshot, curled at the edges. Moony knew the pose from years back. It showed her and Jason and Ariel and Martin, standing at the edge of the pier with their faces raised skyward, smiling and waving at Diana behind her camera. Moony made a face when she saw it and took another swallow of coffee.

"I thought maybe she had AIDS," Moony said at last. "I knew she went to the Walker Clinic once, I heard her on the phone to Diana about it."

Jason nodded, his mouth set in a tight smile. "So you should be happy she doesn't. Hip hip hooray." Two years before Jason's father had tested HIV-positive. Martin's lover, John, had died that spring.

Moony turned so that he couldn't see her face. "She has breast cancer. It's metastasized. She won't see a doctor. This morning she let me feel it..."

Like a gnarled tree branch shoved beneath her mother's flesh, huge and

hard and lumpy. Ariel thought she'd cry or faint or something but all Moony could do was wonder how she had never felt it before. Had she never noticed, or had it just been that long since she'd hugged her mother?

She started crying, and Jason drew closer to her.

"Hey," he whispered, his thin arm edging around her shoulders. "It's okay, Moony, don't cry, it's all right —"

How can you say that? she felt like screaming, sobs constricting her throat so she couldn't speak. When she did talk the words came out in anguished grunts.

"They're dying — how can they — Jason —"

"Shh —" he murmured. "Don't cry, Moony, don't cry..."

Beside her, Jason sighed and fought the urge for another cigarette. He wished he'd thought about this earlier, come up with something to say that would make Moony feel better. Something like, *Hey! Get used to it! Everybody dies!* He tried to smile, but he felt only sorrow and a headache prodding at the corners of his eyes. Moony's head felt heavy on his shoulder. He shifted on the bench, stroking her hair and whispering until she grew quiet. Then they sat in silence.

He stared across the room, to the altar and the wall beyond, where a stained glass window would have been in another kind of chapel. Here, a single great picture window looked out onto the bay. In the distance he could see the Starry Islands glittering in the sunlight, and beyond them the emerald bulk of Blue Hill and Cadillac Mountain rising above the indigo water.

And, if he squinted, he could see Them. The Others, like tears or blots of light floating across his retina. The Golden Ones. The Greeters.

The Light Children.

"Hey!" he whispered. Moony sniffed and burrowed closer into his shoulder, but he wasn't talking to her. He was welcoming Them.

They were the real reason people had settled here, over a century ago. They were the reason Jason and Moony and their parents and all the others came here now, although not everyone could see Them. Moony never had, nor Ariel's friend Diana, although Diana believed in Them, and Moony did not. You never spoke of Them, and if you did, it was always parenthetically and with a capital T — "Rvis and I were looking at the moon last night (They were there) and we thought we saw a whale." Or, "Martin came over at midnight (he saw Them on the way) and we played Scrabble..."

A few years earlier a movement was afoot, to change the way of referring to Them. In a single slender volume that was a history of the Mars Hill spiritualist community, They were referred to as the Light Children, but no one ever really called Them that. Everyone just called them Them. It seemed the most polite thing to do, really, since no one knew what They called Themselves.

"And we'd hate to offend Them," as Ariel said.

That was always a fear at Mars Hill. That, despite the gentle nature of the community's adherents, They inadvertently would be offended one day (a too-noisy volleyball game on the rocky beach; a beer-fueled Solstice celebration interrupting into the dawn), and leave.

But They never did. Year after year the Light Children remained. They were a magical commonplace, like the loons that nested on a nearby pond and made the night an offertory with their cries, or the rainbows that inexplicably appeared over the Bay almost daily, even when there was no rain in sight. It was the same with Them. Jason would be walking down to call his father in from sailing, or knocking at Moony's window to awaken her for a three A.M. stroll, and suddenly there They'd be. A trick of the light, like a sundog or the aurora borealis: golden patches swimming through the cool air. They appeared as suddenly as a cormorant's head slicing up through the water, lingering sometimes for ten minutes or so. Then They would be gone.

Jason saw Them a lot. The chapel was one of the places They seemed to like, and so he hung out there whenever he could. Sometimes he could sense Them moments before They appeared. A shivering in the air would make the tips of his fingers go numb, and once there had been a wonderful smell, like warm buttered bread. But usually there was no warning. If he closed his eyes while looking at Them, Their image still appeared on the cloudy scrim of his inner eye, like gilded tears. But that was all. No voices, no scent of rose petals, no rapping at the door. You felt better after seeing Them, the way you felt better after seeing a rainbow or an eagle above the Bay. But there was nothing really magical about Them, except the fact that They existed at all. They never spoke, or did anything special, at least nothing you could sense. They were just *there*; but Their presence meant everything at Mars Hill.

They were there now: flickering above the altar, sending blots of gold dancing across the limp flowers and faded photograph. He wanted to point Them out to Moony, but he'd tried before and she'd gotten mad at him.

"You think I'm some kind of idiot like my mother?" she'd stormed, sweeping that day's offering of irises from the altar onto the floor. "Give me a break, Jason!"

Okay, I gave you a break, he thought now. Now I'll give you another. Look, Moony, there They are! he thought; then said, "Moony. Look — " He pointed, shrugging his shoulder so she'd have to move. But already They were gone.

"What?" Moony murmured. He shook his head, sighing.

"That picture," he said, and fumbled at his pocket for his cigarettes. "That stupid old picture that Diana took. Can you believe it's still here?"

Moony lifted her head and rubbed her eyes, red and swollen. "Oh, I can believe anything," she said bitterly, and filled her mug with more coffee.

In Martin Dionysos's kitchen, Ariel drank a cup of nettle tea and watched avidly as her friend ate a bowl of mung bean sprouts and nutritional yeast. *Just like in Annie Hall, she thought. Amazing.*

"So now she knows and you're surprised she's pissed at you." Martin raised another forkful of sprouts to his mouth, angling delicately to keep any from falling to the floor. He raised one blond eyebrow as he chewed, looking like some hardscrabble New Englander's idea of Satan, California surfer boy gone to seed. Long gray-blond hair that was thinner than it had been a year ago, skin that wasn't so much tanned as an even pale bronze, with that little goatee and those piercing blue eyes, the same color as the Bay stretching outside the window behind him. Oh yes: and a gold hoop earring and a heart tattoo that enclosed the name *JOHN* and a T-shirt with the pink triangle and *SILENCE-DEATH* printed in stern block letters. Satan on vacation.

"I'm not surprised," Ariel said, a little crossly. "I'm just, mmm, disappointed. That she got so upset."

Martin's other eyebrow arched. *Disappointed?* As in, "Moony, darling, I have breast cancer (which I have kept a secret from you for seven months) and I am very *disappointed* that you are not self-actualized enough to deal with this without falling to pieces?"

"She didn't fall to pieces." Ariel's crossness went over the line into full-blown annoyance. She frowned and jabbed a spoon into her tea. "I wish she'd fall to pieces, she's always so — " She waved the hand holding the spoon, sending green droplets raining onto Martin's knee. " — so *something*."

"Self-assured?"

"I guess. Self-assured and smug, you know? Why is it teenagers are always so fucking smug?"

"Because they share a great secret," Martin said mildly, and took another bite of sprouts.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Their parents are all assholes."

Ariel snorted with laughter, leaned forward to get her teacup out of the danger zone and onto the table. "Oh, Martin," she said. Suddenly her eyes were filled with tears. "Damn it all to *hell*..."

Martin put his bowl on the table and stepped over to take her in his arms. He didn't say anything, and for a moment Ariel flashed back to the previous spring, the same tableau only in reverse, with her holding Martin while he sobbed uncontrollably in the kitchen of his San Francisco townhouse. It was two days after John's funeral, and she was on her way to the airport. She knew then about the breast cancer but she hadn't told Martin yet, didn't want to dim any of the dark luster of his grief.

Now it was her grief, but in a strange way she knew it was his, too. There was this awful thing that they held in common, a great unbroken chain of grief that wound from one coast to the other. She hadn't wanted to share it with Moony, hadn't wanted her to feel its weight and breadth. But it was too late, now. Moony knew and besides, what did it matter? She was dying, Martin was dying and there wasn't a fucking thing anyone could do about it.

"Hey," he said at last. His hand stroked her mass of dark hair, got itself tangled near her shoulder, snagging one of the long silver-and-quartz-crystal earrings she had put on that morning, for luck. "Ouch."

Ariel snorted again, laughing in spite of, or maybe because of, it all. Martin extricated his hand, held up two fingers with a long curling strand of hair caught between them: a question mark, a wise serpent waiting to strike. She had seen him after the cremation take the lock of John's hair that he had saved and hold it so, until suddenly it burst into flames, and then watched as the fizz of ash flared out in a dark penumbra around Martin's fingers. No such thing happened now, no Faery Pagan pyrotechnics. She wasn't dead yet, there was no sharp cold wind of grief to fan Martin's peculiar gift. He let the twirl of hair fall away and looked at her and said, "You know, I talked to Adele."

Adele was Mrs. Grose, she of the pug dog and suspiciously advanced


years. Ariel retrieved her cup and her equanimity, sipping at the nettle tea as Martin went on, "She said she thought we had a good chance. You especially. She said for you it might happen. They might come." He finished and leaned back in his chair, spearing the last forkful of sprouts.

Ariel said, "Oh yes?" Hardly daring to think of it; no don't think of it at all.

Martin shrugged, twisted to look over his shoulder at the endless sweep of Penobscot Bay. His eyes were bright, so bright she wondered if he were fighting tears or perhaps something else, something only Martin would allow himself to feel here and now. Joy, perhaps. Hope.

"Maybe," he said. At his words her heart beat a little faster in her breast, buried beneath the mass that was doing its best to crowd it out. "That's all. Maybe. It might. Happen."

And his hand snaked across the table to hers and held it, clutched it like it was a link in that chain that ran between them, until her fingers went cold and numb.

N WEDNESDAY evenings the people at Mars Hill gave readings for the public. Tarot, palms, auras, dreams — five dollars a pop, nothing guaranteed. The chapel was cleaned, the altar swept of offerings and covered with a frayed red and-white checked table cloth from Diana's kitchen and a few candles in empty Chianti bottles.

"It's not very atmospheric," Gary Bonetti said, as someone always did. Mrs. Grose nodded from her bench and fiddled with her rosary beads.

"Au contraire," protested Martin. "It's very atmospheric, if you're in the mood for spaghetti carbonara at Luigi's."

"May I recommend the primavera?" said Jason. In honor of the occasion he had put on white duck pants and white shirt and red bow tie. He waved at Moony, who stood at the door taking five dollar bills from nervous, giggly tourists and the more solemn-faced locals, who made this pilgrimage every summer. Some regulars came week after week, year after year. Sad Brenda, hoping for the Tarot card that would bring news from her drowned child. Mr. Spruce, a ruddy-faced lobsterman who always tipped Mrs. Grose ten dollars. The Hamptonites Jason had dubbed Mr. and Mrs. Pissant, who were anxious about their auras. Tonight the lobsterman was there, with an ancient woman

who could only be his mother, and the Pissants, and two teenage couples, long blonde hair and sunburned, reeking of marijuana and summer money.

The teenagers went to Martin, lured perhaps by his tie-dyed caftan, neatly pressed and swirling down to his Birkenstock-clad feet.

"Boat trash," hissed Jason, arching a nearly invisible white-blond eyebrow as they passed. "I saw them in Camden, getting off a yacht the size of the fire station. God, they make me sick."

Moony tightened her smile. Catch *her* admitting to envy of people like that. She swiveled on her chair, looking outside to see if there were any newcomers making their way to the chapel through the cool summer night. "I think this is gonna be it," she said. She glanced wistfully at the few crumpled bills nesting in an old oatmeal tin. "Maybe we should, like, advertise or something. It's been so slow this summer."

Jason only grunted, adjusting his bow tie and glaring at the rich kids, now deep in conference with his father. The Pissants had fallen to Diana, who with her chignon of blonde hair and gold-buttoned little black dress could have been one of their neighbors. That left the lobsterman and his aged mother.

They stood in the middle of the big room, looking not exactly uneasy or lost, but as though they were waiting for someone to usher them to their proper seats. And as though she read their minds (but wasn't that her job?), Mrs. Grose swept up suddenly from her corner of the chapel, a warm South Wind composed of yards of very old rayon fabric, Jean Naté After-Bath, and arms large and round and powdered as wheaten loaves.

"Mr. Spruce," she cried, extravagantly trilling her *rrr*'s and opening those arms like a stage gypsy. "You have come —"

"Why, yes," the lobsterman answered, embarrassed but also grateful. "I, uh — I brought my mother, Mrs. Grose. She says she remembers you."

"I do," said Mrs. Spruce. Moony twisted to watch, curious. She had always wondered about Mrs. Grose. She claimed to be a true clairvoyant. She *had* predicted things — nothing very useful, though. What the weather would be like the weekend of Moony's Junior Prom (rainy), but not whether she would be asked to go, or by whom. The day Jason would receive a letter from Harvard (Tuesday, the fifth of April), but not whether he'd be accepted there (he was not). It aggravated Moony, like so much at Mars Hill. What was the use of being a psychic if you could never come up with anything really useful?

But then there was the story about Harry Houdini. Mrs. Grose loved to

tell it, how when she was still living in Chicago this short guy came one day and she gave him a message from his mother and he tried to make her out to be a fraud. It was a stupid story, except for one thing. If it really had happened, it would make Mrs. Grose about ninety or a hundred years old. And she didn't look a day over sixty.

Now Mrs. Grose was cooing over a woman who really *did* look to be about ninety. Mrs. Spruce peered up at her through rheumy eyes, shaking her head and saying in a whispery voice, "I can't believe it's you. I was just a girl, but you don't look any different at all..."

"Oh, flattery, flattery!" Mrs. Grose laughed and rubbed her nose with a Kleenex. "What can we tell you tonight, Mrs. Spruce?"

Moony turned away. It was too weird. She watched Martin entertaining the four golden children, then felt Jason coming up behind her: the way some people claim they can tell a cat is in the room, by some subtle disturbance of air and dust. A cat is there. Jason is there.

"They're *all* going to Harvard. I can't *believe* it," he said, mere disgust curdled into utter loathing. "And that one, the blond on the end — "

"They're all blond, Jason," said Moony. "You're blond."

"I am an *albino*," Jason said with dignity. "Check him out, the Nazi Youth with the Pearl Jam T-shirt. He's a legacy, absolutely. SAT scores of 1060, tops. I *know*." He closed his eyes and wiggled his fingers and made a *whoo-whoo* noise, beckoning spirits to come closer. Moony laughed and covered her mouth. From where he sat Martin raised an eyebrow, requesting silence. Moony and Jason turned and walked outside.

"How old do you think she is?" Moony asked, after they had gone a safe distance from the chapel.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Grose."

"Adele?" Jason frowned into the twilit distance, thinking of the murky shores and shoals of old age. "Jeez, I dunno. Sixty? Fifty?"

Moony shook her head. "She's got to be older than that. I mean, that story about Houdini, you know?"

"Huh! Houdini. The closest she ever got to Houdini is seeing some Siegfried and Roy show out in Las Vegas."

"I don't think she's ever left here. At least not since I can remember."

Jason nodded absently, then squatted in the untidy drive, squinting as he

stared out into the darkness occluding the Bay. Fireflies formed mobile constellations within the birch trees. As a kid he had always loved fireflies, until he had seen Them. Now he thought of the Light Children as a sort of evolutionary step, somewhere between lightning bugs and angels.

Though you hardly ever see Them at night, he thought. *Now why is that?* He rocked back on his heels, looking like some slender pale gargoyle toppled from a modernist cathedral, the cuffs of his white oxford-cloth shirt rolled up to show large bony wrists and surprisingly strong square hands, his bow tie unraveled and hanging rakishly around his neck. Of a sudden he recalled being in this same spot two years ago, grinding out a cigarette as Martin and John approached. The smoke bothered John, sent him into paroxysms of coughing so prolonged and intense that more than once they had set Jason's heart pounding, certain that This Was It, John was going to die right here, right now, and it would be all Jason's fault for smoking. Only of course it didn't happen that way.

"The longest death since Little Nell's," John used to say, laughing hoarsely. That was when he could still laugh, still talk. At the end it had been others softly talking, Martin and Jason and their friends gathered around John's bed at home, taking turns, spelling each other. After a while Jason couldn't stand to be with them. It was too much like John was already dead. The body in the bed so wasted, bones cleaving to skin so thin and mottled it was like damp newsprint.

By the end, Jason refused to accompany Martin to the therapist they were supposed to see. He refused to go with him to the meetings where men and women talked about dying, about watching loved ones go so horribly slowly. Jason just couldn't take it. Grief he had always thought of as an emotion, a mood, something that possessed you but that you eventually escaped. Now he knew it was different. Grief was a country, a place you entered hesitantly, or were thrown into without warning. But once you were there, amidst the roiling formless blackness and stench of despair, you could not leave. Even if you wanted to: you could only walk and walk and walk, traveling on through the black reaches with the sound of screaming in your ears, and hope that someday you might glimpse far off another country, another place where you might someday rest.

Jason had followed John a long ways into that black land. And now his own father would be going there. Maybe not for good, not yet, but Jason knew.

An HIV-positive diagnosis might mean that Death was a long ways off; but Jason knew his father had already started walking.

"...you think they don't leave?"

Jason started. "Huh?" He looked up into Moony's wide gray eyes. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Why do you think they don't leave? Mrs. Grose and Gary. You know, the ones who stay here all year." Moony's voice was exasperated. He wondered how many times she'd asked him the same thing.

"I dunno. I mean, they *have* to leave sometimes. How do they get groceries and stuff?" He sighed and scrambled to his feet. "There's only two of them, maybe they pay someone to bring stuff in. I know Gary goes to the Beach Store sometimes. It's not like they're under house arrest. Why?"

Moony shrugged. In the twilight she looked spooky, more like a witch than her mother or Diana or any of those other wannabes. Long dark hair and those enormous pale gray eyes, face like the face of the cat who'd been turned into a woman in a fairy tale his father had read him once. Jason grinned, thinking of Moony jumping on a mouse. No way. But hey, even if she did, it would take more than *that* to turn him off.

"You thinking of staying here?" he asked slyly. He slipped an arm around her shoulders. "'Cause, like, I could keep you company or something. I hear Maine gets cold in the winter."

"No." Moony shrugged off his arm and started walking toward the water: no longer exasperated, more like she was distracted. "My mother is."

"Your *mother*?"

He followed her until she stopped at the edge of a gravel beach. The evening sky was clear. On the opposite shore, a few lights glimmered in Dark Harbor, reflections of the first stars overhead. From somewhere up along the coast, Bayside or Nagaseek or one of the other summer colonies, the sounds of laughter and skirling music echoed very faintly over the water, like a song heard on some distant station very late at night. But it wasn't late, not yet even nine o'clock. In summers past, that had been early for Moony and Jason, who would often stay up with the adults talking and poring over cards and runes until the night grew cold and spent.

But tonight for some reason the night already felt old. Jason shivered and kicked at the pebbly beach. The last pale light of sunset cast an antique glow upon stones and touched the edge of the water with gold. As he watched, the

light withdrew, a gauzy veil drawn back teasingly until the shore shimmered with afterglow, like blue glass.

"I heard her talking with Diana," Moony said. Her voice was unsettlingly loud and clear in the still air. "She was saying she might stay on, after I go off to school. I mean, she was talking like she wasn't going back at all, I mean not back to Kamensic. Like she might just stay here and never leave again." Her voice cracked on the words *never leave again* and she shuddered, hugging herself.

"Hey," said Jason. He walked over and put his arms around her, her dark hair a perfumed net that drew him in until he felt dizzy and had to draw back, gasping a little, the smell of her nearly overwhelming that of rugosa roses and the sea. "Hey, it's okay, Moony, really it's okay."

Moony's voice sounded explosive, as though she had been holding her breath. "I just can't believe she's giving up like this. I mean, no doctors, nothing. She's just going to stay here and die."

"She might not die," said Jason, his own voice a little desperate. "I mean, look at Adele. A century and counting. The best is yet to come."

Moony laughed brokenly. She leaned forward so that her hair once again spilled over him, her wet cheek resting on his shoulder. "Oh Jason. If it weren't for you I'd go crazy, you know that? I'd just go fucking nuts."

Nuts, thought Jason. His arms tightened around her, the cool air and faraway music nearly drowning him as he stroked her head and breathed her in. *Crazy, oh yes.* And they stood there until the moon showed over Dark Harbor, and all that far-off music turned to silvery light above the Bay.

Two days later Ariel and Moony went to see the doctor in Bangor. Moony drove, an hour's trip inland, up along the old road that ran beside the Penobscot River, through failed stonebound farms and past trailer encampments like sad rusted toys, until finally they reached the sprawl around the city, the kingdom of car lots and franchises and shopping plazas.

The hospital was an old brick building with a shiny new white wing grafted on. Ariel and Moony walked through a gleaming steel-and-glass door set in the expanse of glittering concrete. But they ended up in a tired office on the far end of the old wing, where the squeak of rubber wheels on worn linoleum played counterpoint to a loudly echoing, ominous *drip-drip* that never ceased the whole time they were there.

"Ms. Rising. Please, come in."

Ariel squeezed her daughter's hand, then followed the doctor into her office. It was a small bright room, a hearty wreath of living ivy trained around its single grimy window in defiance of the lack of sunlight and, perhaps, the black weight of despair that Ariel felt everywhere, chairs, desk, floor, walls.

"I received your records from New York," the doctor said. She was a slight fine-boned young woman with sleek straight hair and a silk dress more expensive than what you usually saw in Maine. The little metal name-tag on her breast might have been an odd bit of heirloom jewelry. "You realize that even as of three weeks ago, the cancer had spread to the point where our treatment options are now quite limited."

Ariel nodded, her arms crossed protectively across her chest. She felt strange, light-headed. She hadn't been able to eat much the last day or two, that morning had swallowed a mouthful of coffee and a stale muffin to satisfy Moony but that was all. "I know," she said heavily. "I don't know why I'm here."

"Frankly, I don't know either," the doctor replied. "If you had optioned for some kind of intervention oh, even two months ago; but now..."

Ariel tilted her head, surprised at how sharp the other woman's tone was. The doctor went on, "It's a great burden to put on your daughter — " She looked in the direction of the office door, then glanced down at the charts in her hand. "Other children?"

Ariel shook her head. "No."

The doctor paused, gently slapping the sheaf of charts and records against her open palm. Finally she said, "Well. Let's examine you, then."

An hour later Ariel slipped back into the waiting room. Moony looked up from a magazine. Her gray eyes were bleary and her tired expression hastily congealed into the mask of affronted resentment with which she faced Ariel these days.

"So?" she asked as they retraced their steps back through cinder-block corridors to the hospital exit. "What'd she say?"

Ariel stared straight ahead, through the glass doors to where the summer afternoon waited to pounce on them. Exhaustion had seeped into her like heat, like the drugs the doctor had offered and Ariel had refused, the contents of crystal vials that could buy a few more weeks, maybe even months if she was lucky, enough time to make a graceful farewell to the world. But Ariel

didn't want weeks or months, and she sure as hell didn't want graceful goodbyes. She wanted years, decades. A cantankerous or dreamy old age, aggravating the shit out of her grandchildren with her talk about her own sunflower youth. Failing that, she wanted screaming and gnashing of teeth, her friends tearing their hair out over her death, and Moony...

And Moony. Ariel stopped in front of a window, one hand out to press against the smooth cool glass. Grief and horror hit her like a stone, struck her between the eyes so that she gasped and drew her hands to her face.

"Mom!" Moony cried, shocked. "Mom, what *is* it, are you all right? — "

Ariel nodded, tears burning down her cheeks. "I'm fine," she said, and gave a twisted smile. "Really, I'm — "

"What did she *say*?" demanded Moony. "The doctor, what did she tell you, *what is it*?"

Ariel wiped her eyes, a black line of mascara smeared across her finger. "Nothing. Really, Moony, nothing's changed. It's just — it's just hard. Being this sick. It's hard, that's all."

She could see in her daughter's face confusion, despair, but also relief. Ariel hadn't said *death*, she hadn't said *dying*, she hadn't since that first day said *cancer*. She'd left those words with the doctor, along with the scripts for morphine and Fiorinal, all that could be offered to her now. "Come on," she said, and walked through the sliding doors. "I'm supposed to have lunch with Mrs. Grose and Diana, and it's already late."

Moony stared at her in disbelief: was her mother being stoic or just crazy? But Ariel didn't say anything else, and after a moment her daughter followed her to the car.

IN MARS HILL'S little chapel Jason sat and smoked. On the altar in front of him were several weeks' accumulated offerings from the denizens of Mars Hill. An old-fashioned envelope with a glassine window, through which he could glimpse the face of a twenty-dollar bill — that was from Mrs. Grose, who always gave the money she'd earned from readings (and then retrieved it at the end of the summer). A small square of brilliantly woven cloth from Diana, whose looms punctuated the soft morning with their steady racketing. A set of blueprints from Rvis Capricorn. Shasta Daisy's battered *Ephemera*. The

copy of Paul Bowles' autobiography that Jason's father had been reading on the flight out from the West Coast. In other words, the usual flotsam of love and whimsy that washed up here every summer. From where Jason sat, he could see his own benefaction, a heap of small white roses, already limp but still giving out their heady sweet scent, and a handful of blackberries he'd picked from the thicket down by the pier. Not much of an offering, but you never knew.

From beneath his roses peeked the single gift that puzzled him, a lacy silk camisole patterned with pale pink-and-yellow blossoms. An odd choice of offering, Jason thought. Because for all the unattached adults sipping chardonnay and Bellinis of a summer evening, the atmosphere at Mars Hill was more like that of summer camp. A chaste sort of giddiness ruled here, compounded of equal parts of joy and longing, that always made Jason think of the garlanded jackass and wistful fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. His father and Ariel and all the rest stumbling around in the dark, hoping for a glimpse of Them, and settling for fireflies and the lights from Dark Harbor. Mars Hill held surprisingly little in the way of unapologetic lust — except for himself and Moony, of course. And Jason knew that camisole didn't belong to Moony.

At the thought of Moony he sighed and tapped his ashes onto the dusty floor. It was a beautiful morning, gin-clear and with a stiff warm breeze from the west. Perfect sailing weather. He should be out with his father on the *Wendameen*. Instead he'd stayed behind, to write and think. Earlier he'd tried to get through to Moony somewhere in Bangor, but Jason couldn't send his thoughts any farther than from one end of Mars Hill to the other. For some reason, smoking cigarettes seemed to help. He had killed half a pack already this morning, but gotten nothing more than a headache and a raw throat. Now he had given up. It never seemed to work with anyone except Moony, anyhow, and then only if she was nearby.

He had wanted to give her some comfort. He wanted her to know how much he loved her, how she meant more to him than anyone or anything in the world, except perhaps his father. Was it allowed, to feel this much for a person when your father was HIV-positive? Jason frowned and stubbed out his cigarette in a lobster-shaped ashtray, already overflowing with the morning's telepathic aids. He picked up his notebook and Rapidograph pen and, still frowning, stared at the letter he'd begun last night.

Dearest Moony,

(he crossed out *est*, it sounded too fussy)

I just want you to know that I understand how you feel. When John died it was the most horrible thing in the world, even worse than the divorce because I was just a kid then. I just want you to know how much I love you, you mean more than anyone or anything in the world, and

And what? Did he really know how she felt? His mother wasn't dying, his mother was in the Napa Valley running her vineyard, and while it was true enough that John's death had been the most horrible thing he'd ever lived through, could that be the same as having your mother die? He thought maybe it could. And then of course there was the whole thing with his father. Was that worse? His father wasn't sick, of course, at least he didn't have any symptoms yet, but was it worse for someone you loved to have the AIDS virus, to watch and wait for months or years, rather than have it happen quickly like with Ariel? Last night he'd sat in the living room while his father and Gary Bonetti were on the porch talking about her.

"I give her only a couple of weeks," Martin had said, with that dry strained calm voice he'd developed over the last few years of watching his friends die. "The thing is, if she'd gone for treatment right away she could be fine now. She could be *fine*." The last word came out in an uncharacteristic burst of vehemence, and Jason grew cold to hear it. Because of course even with treatment his father probably wouldn't be all right, not now, not ever. He'd never be fine again. Ariel had thrown all that away.

"She should talk to Adele," Gary said softly. Jason heard the clink of ice as he poured himself another daiquiri. "When I had those visions five years ago, that's when I saw Adele. You should too, Martin. You really should."

"I don't know as Adele can help me," Martin said, somewhat coolly. "She's just a guest here, like you or any of the rest of us. And you know that you can't make Them..."

His voice trailed off. Jason sat bolt upright on the sofa, suddenly feeling his father there, like a cold finger stabbing at his brain.

"Jason?" Martin called, his voice tinged with annoyance. "If

you want to listen, come in *here*, please."

Jason had sworn under his breath and stormed out through the back door. It was impossible, sometimes, living with his father. Better to have a psychic wannabe like Ariel for a parent, and not have to worry about being spied on all the time.

Now, from outside the chapel came frenzied barking. Jason started, his thoughts broken. He glanced through the open door to see Gary and his black labrador retriever heading down to the water. Gary was grinning, arms raised as he waved at someone out of sight. And suddenly Jason had an image of his father in the *Wendameen*, the fast little sloop skirting the shore as Martin stood at the mast waving back, his long hair tangled by the wind. The vision left Jason nearly breathless. He laughed, shaking his head, and at once decided to follow Gary to the landing and meet his father there. He picked up his pen and notebook and turned to go. Then stopped, his neck prickling. Very slowly he turned, until he stood facing the altar once more.

They were there. A shimmering haze above the fading roses, like Zeus's golden rain falling upon imprisoned Danaë. Jason's breath caught in his throat as he watched Them — They were so beautiful, so *strange*. Flickering in the chapel's dusty air, like so many scintillant coins. He could sense rather than hear a faint chiming as They darted quick as hummingbirds from his roses to Mrs. Grose's envelope, alighting for a moment upon Diana's weaving and Rvis's prize tomatoes before settling upon two things: his father's book and the unknown camisole.

And then with a sharp chill Jason knew whose it was. Ariel's, of course — who else would own something so unabashedly romantic but also slightly tacky? Maybe it was meant to be a bad joke, or perhaps it was a real offering, heartfelt, heartbreaking. He stared at Them, a glittering carpet tossed over those two pathetic objects, and had to shield his eyes with his hand. It was too bright, They seemed to be growing more and more brilliant as he watched. Like a swarm of butterflies he had once seen, mourning cloaks resting in a snow-covered field one warm March afternoon, their wings slowly fanning the air as though They had been stunned by the thought of spring. But what could ever surprise *Them*, the Light Children, the summer's secret?

Then as he watched They began to fade. The glowing golden edge of the swarm grew dim and disappeared. One by one all the other gilded coins blinked into nothing, until the altar stood as it had minutes before, a dusty

collection of things, odd and somewhat ridiculous. Jason's head pounded and he felt faint; then realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it out, shuddering, put his pen and notebook on the floor and walked to the altar.

Everything was as it had been, roses, cloth, paper, tomatoes, excepting only his father's offering, and Ariel's. Hesitantly he reached to touch the book Martin had left, then recoiled.

The cover of the book had been damaged. When he leaned over to stare at it more closely, he saw that myriad tiny holes had been burned in the paper, in what at first seemed to be a random pattern. But when he picked it up — gingerly, as though it might yet release an electrical jolt or some other hidden energy — he saw that the tiny perforations formed an image, blurred but unmistakable. The shadow of a hand, four fingers splayed across the cover as though gripping it.

Jason went cold. He couldn't have explained how, but he knew that it was a likeness of his father's hand that he saw there, eerie and chilling as those monstrous shadows left by victims of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With a frightened gasp he tossed the book back onto the altar. For a moment he stood beside the wooden table, half-poised to flee, but finally reached over and tentatively pushed aside his roses to fully reveal the camisole.

It was just like the book. Thousands of tiny burn-holes made a ruined lace of the pastel silk, most of them clustered around one side of the bodice. He picked it up, catching a faint fragrance, lavender and marijuana, and held it out by its pink satin straps. He raised it, turning toward the light streaming through the chapel's picture window, and saw that the pinholes formed a pattern, elegant as the tracery of veins and capillaries on a leaf. A shadowy bull's-eye — breast, aureole, nipple drawn on the silken cloth.

With a small cry Jason dropped the camisole. Without looking back he ran from the chapel. Such was his hurry that he forgot his pen and notebook and the half-written letter to Moony, piled carefully on the dusty floor. And so he did not see the shining constellation that momentarily appeared above the pages, a curious cloud that hovered there like a child's dream of weather before flowering into a golden rain.

Moony sat hunched on the front stoop, waiting for her mother to leave. Ariel had been in her room for almost half an hour, her luncheon date with

Diana and Mrs. Grose notwithstanding. When finally she emerged, Moony could hear the soft uneven tread of her flip-flops, padding from bedroom to bedroom to kitchen. There was the sigh of the refrigerator opening and closing, the muted pop of a cork being pulled from a bottle, the long grateful gurgle of wine being poured into a glass. Then Ariel herself in the doorway behind her. Without looking Moony could tell that she'd put on The Skirt. She could smell it, the musty scents of patchouli and cannabis resin and the honeysuckle smell of the expensive detergent Ariel used to wash it by hand, as though it were some precious winding sheet.

"I'm going to Adele's for lunch."

Moony nodded silently.

"I'll be back in a few hours."

More silence.

"You know where to find me if anyone comes by." Ariel nudged her daughter gently with her toe. "Okay?"

Moony sighed. "Yeah, okay."

She watched her mother walk out the door, sun bouncing off her hair in glossy waves. When Ariel was out of sight she hurried down the hall.

In her mother's room, piles of clothes and papers covered the worn Double Wedding Ring quilt, as though tossed helter-skelter from her bureau.

"Jeez, what a mess," said Moony. She slowly crossed to the bed. It was covered with scarves and tangled skeins of pantyhose; drifts of old catering receipts, bills, canceled checks. A few paperbacks with yellowed pages that had been summer reading in years past. A back issue of *Gourmet* magazine and the *Maine Progressive*. A Broadway ticket stub from *Prelude to a Kiss*. Grimacing, Moony prodded the edge of last year's calendar from the Beach Store & Pizza to Go.

What had her mother been looking for?

Then, as if by magic, Moony saw it. Its marbled cover suddenly glimpsed beneath a dusty strata of tarot cards and Advil coupons, like some rare bit of fossil, lemur vertebrae or primate jaw hidden within papery shale. She drew it out carefully, tilting it so the light slid across the title.

MARS HILL: ITS HISTORY AND LORE

by

Abigail Merithew Cox,

A Lover of Its Mysteries

With careful fingers Moony rifled the pages. Dried rose petals fell out, releasing the sad smell of summers past, and then a longer plume of liatris dropped to the floor, fresh enough to have left a faint purplish stain upon the page. Moony drew the book up curiously, marking the page where the liatris had fallen, and read,

Perhaps strangest of all the Mysteries of our Colony at Mars Hill is the presence of those Enchanted Visitors who make their appearance now and then, to the eternal Delight of those of us fortunate enough to receive the benison of their presence. I say Delight, though many of us who have conjured with them say that the Experience resembles Rapture more than mere Delight, and even that Surpassing Ecstasy of which the Ancients wrote and which is at the heart of all our Mysteries; though we are not alone in enjoying the favor of our Visitors. It is said by my Aunt, Sister Rosemary Merithew, that the Pasamaquoddie Indians who lived here long before the civilizing influence of the White Man, also entertained these Ethereal Creatures, which are in appearance like to those fairy lights called Foxfire or Will O' The Wisp, and which may indeed be the inspiration for such spectral rumors. The Pasamaquoddie named them Akiniki, which in their language means The Greeters; and this I think is a most appropriate title for our Joyous Guests, who bring only Good News from the Other Side, and who feast upon our mortality as a man sups upon rare meats...

Moony stared at the page in horror and disgust. *Feasting* upon mortality? She recalled her mother and Jason talking about the things they called the Light Children, Jason's disappointment that They had never appeared to Moony. As though there was something wrong with her, as though she wasn't worthy of seeing Them. But she had never felt that way. She had always suspected that Jason and her mother and the rest were mistaken about the Light Children. When she was younger, she had even accused her mother of lying about seeing Them. But the other people at Mars Hill spoke of Them, and Jason, at least, would never lie to Moony. So she had decided there must

be something slightly delusional about the whole thing. Like a mass hypnosis, or maybe some kind of mass drug flashback, which seemed more likely considering the histories of some of her mother's friends.

Still, that left Mrs. Grose, who never even took an aspirin. Who, as far as Moony knew, had never been sick in her life, and who certainly seemed immune to most of the commonplace ailments of what must be, despite appearances, an advanced age. Mrs. Grose claimed to speak with the Light Children, to have a sort of understanding of Them that Ariel and the others lacked. And Moony had always held Mrs. Grose in awe. Maybe because her own grandparents were all dead, maybe just because of that story about Houdini — it was too fucking weird, no one could have made it up.

And so maybe no one had made up the Light Children, either. Moony tapped the book's cover, frowning. Why couldn't she see Them? Was it because she didn't believe? The thought annoyed her. As though she were a kid who'd found out about Santa Claus, and was being punished for learning the truth. She stared at the book's cover, the gold lettering flecked with dust, the peppering of black and green where salt air and mildew had eaten away at the cloth. The edge of one page crumbled as she opened it once more.

Many of my brothers and sisters can attest to the virtues of Our Visitors, particularly Their care for the dying and afflicted...

"Fucking *bullshit*," yelled Moony. She threw the book across the room, hard, so that it slammed into the wall beside her mother's bureau. With a soft *crack* the spine broke. She watched stonily as yellow pages and dried blossoms fluttered from between the split covers, a soft explosion of antique dreams. She left the room without picking up the mess, the door slamming shut behind her.

"I was consumptive," Mrs. Grose was saying, nodding as she looked in turn from Ariel to Diana to the pug sprawled panting on the worn chintz sofa beside them. "Tuberculosis, you know. Coming here saved me."

"You mean like, taking the waters?" asked Ariel. She shook back her hair and took another sip of her gin-and-tonic. "Like they used to do at Saratoga Springs and places like that?"

"Not like that *at all*," replied Mrs. Grose firmly. She raised one white

eyebrow and frowned. "I mean, Mars Hill saved me."

Saved you for what? thought Ariel, choking back another mouthful of gin. She shuddered. She knew she shouldn't drink, these days she could feel it seeping into her, like that horrible barium they injected into you to do tests. But she couldn't stop. And what was the point, anyway?

"But you think it might help her, if she stayed here!" Diana broke in, oblivious of Mrs. Grose's imperious gaze. "And Martin, do you think it could help him too?"

"I don't think *anything*," said Mrs. Grose, and she reached over to envelope the wheezing pug with one large fat white hand. "It is absolutely not up to me at all. I am simply *telling* you the *facts*."

"Of course," Ariel said, but she could tell from Diana's expression that her words had come out slurred. "Of *course*," she repeated with dignity, sitting up and smoothing the folds of her patchwork skirt.

"As long as you understand," Mrs. Grose said in a gentler tone. "We are guests here, and guests do not ask favors of their hosts."

The other two women nodded. Ariel carefully put her glass on the coffee table and stood, wiping her sweating hands on her skirt. "I better go now," she said. Her head pounded and she felt nauseated, for all that she'd barely nibbled at the ham sandwiches and macaroni salad Mrs. Grose had set out for lunch. "Home. I think I'd better go home."

"I'll go with you," said Diana. She stood and cast a quick look at their hostess. "I wanted to borrow that book..."

Mrs. Grose saw them to the door, holding open the screen and swatting threateningly at mosquitoes as they walked outside. "Remember what I told you," she called as they started down the narrow road, Diana with one arm around Ariel's shoulder. "Meditation and nettle tea. And patience."

"Patience," Ariel murmured; but nobody heard.

THE WEEKS passed. The weather was unusually clear and warm, Mars Hill bereft of the cloak of mist and fog that usually covered it in August. Martin Dionysos took the *Wendameen* out nearly every afternoon, savoring the time alone, the hours spent fighting wind and waves—antagonists he felt he could win against.

"It's the most perfect summer we've ever had," Gary Bonetti said often

to his friend. Too often, Martin thought bitterly. Recently, Martin was having what Jason called Millennial Thoughts, seeing ominous portents in everything from the tarot cards he dealt out to stricken tourists on Wednesday nights to the pattern of kelp and maidenhair left on the gravel beach after one of the summer's few storms. He had taken to avoiding Ariel, a move that filled him with self-loathing, for all that he told himself that he still needed time to grieve for John before giving himself over to another death. But it wasn't that, of course. Or at least it wasn't *only* that. It was fear, *The Fear*. It was listening to his own heart pounding as he lay alone in bed at night, counting the beats, wondering at what point it all began to break down, at what point it would come to take him.

So he kept to himself. He begged off going on the colony's weekly outing to the little Mexican restaurant up the road. He even stopped attending the weekly readings in the chapel. Instead, he spent his evenings alone, writing to friends back in the Bay Area. After drinking coffee with Jason every morning he'd turn away.

"I'm going to work now," he'd announce, and Jason would nod and leave to find Moony, grateful, his father thought, for the opportunity to escape.

Millennial Thoughts.

Martin Dionysos had given over a corner of his cottage's living room to a studio. There was a tiny drafting table, his portable computer, an easel, stacks of books, the week's forwarded offerings of *Out!* and *The Advocate* and *Q* and *The Bay Weekly*, and, heaped on an ancient stained Windsor chair, the usual pungent mess of oils and herbal decoctions that he used in his work. Golden morning light streamed through the wide mullioned windows, smelling of salt and the diesel fumes from Diana's ancient Volvo. On the easel a large unprimed canvas rested, somewhat unevenly due to the cant of a floor slanted enough that you could drop a marble in the kitchen and watch it roll slowly but inexorably to settle in the left-hand corner of the living room. Gary Bonetti claimed that it wasn't that all of the cottages on Mars Hill were built by incompetent architects. It was the magnetic pull of the ocean just meters away, it was the imperious reins of the East, of the Moon, of the magic charters of the Otherworld, that made it impossible to find any two corners that were plumb. Martin and the others laughed at Gary's pronouncement, but John had believed it.

John. Martin sighed, stirred desultorily at a coffee can filled with linseed

oil and turpentine, then rested the can on the windowsill. For a long time he had been so caught up with the sad and harrowing and noble and disgusting details of John's dying that he had been able to forestall thinking about his own diagnosis. He had been grateful, in an awful way, that there had been something so horrible, so unavoidably and demandingly *real*, to keep him from succumbing to his own despair.

But all that was gone now. John was gone. Before John's death, Martin had always had a sort of unspoken, formless belief in an afterlife. The long shadow cast by a 1950s Catholic boyhood, he guessed. But when John died, that small hidden solace had died too. There was nothing there. No vision of a beloved waiting for him on the other side. Not even a body moldering within a polished mahogany casket. Only ashes, ashes; and his own death waiting like a small patient vicious animal in the shadows.

"Shit," he said. He gritted his teeth. This was how it happened to Ariel. She gave in to despair, or dreams, or maybe she just pretended it would go away. She'd be lucky now to last out the summer. At the thought a new wave of grief washed over him, and he groaned.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit," he whispered. With watering eyes he reached for the can full of primer on the sill. As he did so, he felt a faint prickling go through his fingers, a sensation of warmth that was almost painful. He swore under his breath and frowned. A tiny stab of fear lanced through him. Inexplicable and sudden pain, wasn't that the first sign of some sort of degeneration? As his fingers tightened around the coffee can, he looked up. The breath froze in his throat and he cried aloud, snatching his hand back as though he'd been stung.

They were there. Dozens of Them, a horde of flickering golden spots so dense They obliterated the wall behind Them. Martin had seen Them before, but never so close, never so many. He gasped and staggered back, until he struck the edge of the easel and sent the canvas clattering to the floor. They took no notice, instead followed him like a swarm of silent hornets. And as though They were hornets, Martin shouted and turned to run.

Only he could not. He was blinded, his face seared by a terrible heat. They were everywhere, enveloping him in a shimmering cocoon of light and warmth, Their fierce radiance burning his flesh, his eyes, his throat, as though he breathed in liquid flame. He shrieked, batting at the air, and then babbling fell back against the wall. As They swarmed over him he felt Them, not as

you feel the sun but as you feel a drug or love or anguish, filling him until he moaned and sank to the floor. He could feel his skin burning and erupting, his bones turning to ash inside him. His insides knotted, cramping until he thought he would faint. He doubled over, retching, but only a thin stream of spittle ran down his chin. An explosive burst of pain raced through him. He opened his mouth to scream, the sound so thin it might have been an insect whining. Then there was nothing but light, nothing but flame; and Martin's body unmoving on the floor.

Moony waited until late afternoon, but Jason never came. Hours earlier, Moony had glanced out the window of her cottage and seen Gary Bonetti running up the hill to Martin's house, followed minutes later by the panting figure of Mrs. Grose. Jason she didn't see at all. He must have never left his cottage that morning, or else left and returned by the back door.

Something had happened to Martin. She knew that as soon as she saw Gary's stricken face. Moony thought of calling Jason, but did not. She did nothing, only paced and stared out the window at Jason's house, hoping vainly to see someone else enter or leave. No one did.

Ariel had been sleeping all day. Moony avoided even walking past her mother's bedroom, lest her own terror wake her. She was afraid to leave the cottage, afraid to find out the truth. Cold dread stalked her all afternoon as she waited for something — an ambulance, a phone call, *anything* — but nothing happened. Nobody called, nobody came. Although once, her nostrils filled with the acrid smell of cigarette smoke, and she felt Jason there. Not Jason himself, but an overwhelming sense of terror that she knew came from him, a fear so intense that she drew her breath in sharply, her hand shooting out to steady herself against the door. Then the smell of smoke was gone.

"Jason?" she whispered, but she knew he was no longer thinking of her. She stood with her hand pressed against the worn silvery frame of the screen door. She kept expecting Jason to appear, to explain things. But there was nothing. For the first time all summer, Jason seemed to have forgotten her. Everyone seemed to have forgotten her.

That had been hours ago. Now it was nearly sunset. Moony lay on her towel on the gravel beach, swiping at a mosquito and staring up at the cloudless sky, blue skimmed to silver as the sun melted away behind Mars Hill. What a crazy place this was. Someone gets sick, and instead of dialing

911 you send for an obese old fortuneteller. The thought made her stomach churn; because of course that's what her mother had done. Put her faith in fairy dust and crystals instead of physicians and chemo. Abruptly Moony sat up, hugging her knees.

"Damn," she said miserably

She'd put off going home, half-hoping, half-dreading that someone would find her and tell her what the hell was going on. Now it was obvious that she'd have to find out for herself. She threw her towel into her bag, tugged on a hooded pullover and began to trudge back up the hill.

On the porches of the other cottages she could see people stirring. Whatever had happened, obviously none of *them* had heard yet. The new lesbian couple from Burlington sat facing each other in matching wicker armchairs, eyes closed and hands extended. A few houses on, Shasta Daisysat on the stoop of her tiny Queen Anne Victorian, sipping a wine cooler, curled sheets of graph paper littering the table in front of her.

"Where's your mom?" Shasta called.

Moony shrugged and wiped a line of sweat from her cheek. "Resting, I guess."

"Come have a drink." Shasta raised her bottle. "I'll do your chart."

Moony shook her head. "Later. I got to get dinner."

"Don't forget there's a moon circle tonight," said Shasta. "Nine thirty at the gazebo."

"Right." Moony nodded, smiling glumly as she passed. What a bunch of kooks. At least her mother would be sleeping and not wasting her time conjuring up someone's aura between wine coolers.

But when she got home, no one was there. She called her mother's name as the screen door banged shut behind her, waited for a reply but there was none. For an instant a terrifying surge raced through her: something else had happened, her mother lay dead in the bedroom...

But the bedroom was empty, as were the living room and bathroom and anyplace else where Ariel might have chosen to die. The heady scent of basil filled the cottage, with a fainter hint of marijuana. When Moony finally went into the kitchen, she found the sink full of sand and half-rinsed basil leaves. Propped up on the drainboard was a damp piece of paper towel with a message spelled out in runny magic marker.

Moony: Went to Chapel
Moon circle at 9:30
Love love love Mom

"Right," Moony said, disgusted. She crumpled the note and threw it on the floor. "Way to go, Mom."

Marijuana, moon circle, astrological charts. Fucking *idiots*. Of a sudden she was filled with rage, at her mother and Jason and Martin and all the rest. Why weren't there any *doctors* here? Or lawyers, or secretaries, or anyone with half a brain, enough at least to take some responsibility for the fact that there were sick people here, people who were *dying* for Christ's sake and what was anyone doing about it? What was *she* doing about it?

"I've had it," she said aloud. "I have *had* it." She spun around and headed for the front door, her long hair an angry black blur around her grim face. "Amanda Rheining, you are going to the hospital. Now."

She strode down the hill, ignoring Shasta's questioning cries. The gravel bit into her bare feet as she rounded the turn leading to the chapel. From here she could glimpse the back door of Jason and Martin's cottage. As Moony hurried past a stand of birches, she glimpsed Diana standing by the door, one hand resting on its crooked wooden frame. She was gazing out at the Bay with a rapt expression that might have been joy or exhausted grief, her hair gilded with the dying light.

For a moment Moony stopped, biting her lip. Diana at least might understand. She could ask Diana to come and help her force Ariel to go to the hospital. It would be like the intervention they'd done with Diana's ex-husband. But that would mean going to Martin's cottage, and confronting whatever it was that waited inside. Besides, Moony knew that no one at Mars Hill would ever force Ariel to do something she didn't want to do, even live. No. It was up to her to save her mother: herself, Maggie Rheining. Abruptly she turned away.

Westering light fell through the leaves of the ancient oak that shadowed the weathered gray chapel. The lupines and tiger lilies had faded with the dying summer. Now violet plumes of liatris sprang up around the chapel door beside unruly masses of sweet-smelling phlox and glowing clouds of asters. Of course no one ever weeded or thinned out the garden. The flowers choked the path leading to the door, so that Moony had to beat away a net of bees and

lacewings and pale pink moths like rose petals, all of them rising from the riot of blossoms and then falling in a softly moving skein about the girl's shoulders as she walked. Moony cursed and slashed at the air, heedless of a luna moth's drunken somersault above her head, the glimmering wave of fireflies that followed her through the twilight.

At the chapel doorway Moony stopped. Her heart was beating hard, and she spat and brushed a liatris frond from her mouth. From inside she could hear a low voice; her mother's voice. She was reciting the verse that, over the years, had become a sort of blessing for her, a little mantra she chanted and whispered summer after summer, always in hopes of summoning Them —

*"With this field-dew consecrate
Every fairy take his gait
And each several chamber bless,
through this palace, with sweet peace;
Ever shall in safety rest,
and the owner of it blest."*

At the sound, Moony felt her heart clench inside her. She moved until her face pressed against the ancient gray screen sagging within its doorframe. The screen smelled heavily of dust; she pinched her nose to keep from sneezing. She gazed through the fine moth-pocked web as though through a silken scrim or the Bay's accustomed fog.

Her mother was inside. She stood before the wooden altar, pathetic with its faded burden of wilting flowers and empty bottles and Jason's cigarette butts scattered across the floor. From the window facing the Bay, lilac-colored light flowed into the room, mingling with the shafts of dusty gold falling from the casements set high within the opposing wall. Where the light struck the floor a small bright pool had formed. Ariel was dancing slowly in and out of this, her thin arms raised, the long heavy sweep of her patchwork skirt sliding back and forth to reveal her slender legs and bare feet, shod with a velvety coat of dust. Moony could hear her reciting, Shakespeare's fairies' song again, and a line from Julian of Norwich that Diana had taught her:

All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

And suddenly the useless purity of Ariel's belief overwhelmed Moony.

A stoned forty-three-year-old woman with breast cancer and a few weeks left to live, dancing inside a ruined chapel and singing to herself. Tears filled Moony's eyes, fell and left a dirty streak against the screen. She drew a deep breath, fighting the wave of grief and despair, and pushed against the screen to enter. When she raised her head again, Ariel had stopped.

At first Moony thought her mother had seen her. But no. Ariel was staring straight ahead at the altar, her head cocked to one side as though listening. So intent was she that Moony stiffened as well, inexplicably frightened. She glanced over her shoulder, but of course there was no one there. But it was too late to keep her heart from pounding. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and turned, stepping over the sill toward Ariel.

"Mom," Moony called softly. "Mom, I'm —"

Moony froze. In the center of the chapel her mother stood, arms writhing as she held them above her head, long hair whipping across her face. She was on fire. Flickers of gold and crimson ran along her arms and chest, lapped at her throat and face and set runnels of light flaming across her clothes. Moony could hear her shrieking, could see her tearing at her breast as she tried to rip away the burning fabric. With a howl Moony stumbled across the room — not thinking, hardly even seeing her as she lunged to grab Ariel and pull her down.

"Mom!"

But before she could reach Ariel she tripped, smashed onto the uneven floor. Groaning she rolled over and tried to get back up. An arm's-length away, her mother flailed, her voice given over now to a high shrill keening, her flapping arms still raised above her head. And for the first time Moony realized that there was no real heat, no flames. No smoke filled the little room. The light that streamed through the picture window was clear and bright as dawn.

Her mother was not on fire. She was with Them.

They were everywhere, like bees swarming across a bank of flowers. Radiant beads of gold and argent covered Ariel until Moony no longer saw her mother, but only the blazing silhouette of a woman, a numinous figure that sent a prismatic aurora rippling across the ceiling. Moony fell back, horrified, awe-struck. The figure continued its bizarre dance, hands lifting and falling as though reaching for something that was being pulled just out of reach. She could hear her mother's voice, muted now to a soft repetitive cry — *uh, uh!* — and a very faint clear tone, like the sustained note of a glass harmonica.

"Jesus," Moony whispered, then yelled, "*Jesus! Stop it, stop —*"

But They didn't stop; only moved faster and faster across Ariel's body until her mother was nothing but a blur, a chrysalis encased in glittering pollen, a burning ghost. Moony's breath scraped against her throat. Her hands clawed at her knees, the floor, her own breasts, as her mother kept on with that soft moaning and the sound of the Light Children filled the chapel the way wine fills a glass.

And then gradually it all began to subside. Gradually the glowing sheath fell from her mother, not fading so much as *thinning*, the way Moony had once read the entrance to a woman's womb will thin as its burden wakes to be born. The chiming noise died away. There was only a faint high echo in Moony's ears. Violet light spilled from the high windows, a darker if weaker wine. Ariel sprawled on the dusty floor, her arms curled up against her chest like the dried hollow limbs of an insect, scarab or patient mantis. Her mouth was slack, and the folds of tired skin around her eyes. She looked inutterably exhausted, but also somehow at peace. With a cold stab like a spike driven into her breast, Moony knew that this was how Ariel would look in death; knew that this was how she looked, now, knew that she was dead.

But she wasn't. As Moony watched, her mother's mouth twitched. Then Ariel sneezed, squeezing her eyes tightly. Finally she opened them to gaze at the ceiling. Moony stared at her, uncomprehending. She began to cry, sobbing so loudly that she didn't hear what her mother was saying, didn't hear Ariel's hoarse voice whispering the same words over and over and over again —

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! —"

But Moony wasn't listening. And only in her mother's own mind did Ariel herself ever again hear Their voices. Like an unending stream of golden coins being poured into a well, the eternal and incomprehensible echo of Their reply —

"You are Welcome."

There must have been a lot of noise. Because before Moony could pull herself together and go to her mother, Diana was there, her face white but her eyes set and in control, as though she were an ambulance driver inured to all kinds of terrible things. She took Ariel in her arms and got her to her feet. Ariel's head flopped to one side, and for a moment Moony thought she'd slide to the floor again. But then she seemed to rally. She blinked, smiled fuzzily

at her daughter and Diana. After a few minutes, she let Diana walk her to the door. She shook her head gently but persistently when her daughter tried to help.

"You can follow us, darling," Diana called back apologetically as they headed down the path to Martin's cottage. But Moony made no move to follow. She only watched in disbelief — *I can follow you? Of course I can, asshole!* — and then relief, as the two women lurched safely through the house's crooked door.

Let someone *else* take care of her for a while, Moony thought bitterly. She shoved her hands into her pockets. Her terror had turned to anger. Now, perversely, she needed to yell at someone. She thought briefly of following her mother; then of finding Jason. But really, she knew all along where she had to go.

MRS. GROSE seemed surprised to see her (*Ha!* thought Moony triumphantly; what kind of psychic would be *surprised!*). But maybe there was something about her after all. Because she had just made a big pot of chamomile tea, heavily spiked with brandy, and set out a large white plate patterned with alarmingly lifelike butterflies and bees, the insects seeming to hover intently beside several slabs of cinnamon-fragrant zucchini bread.

"They just keep multiplying." Mrs. Grose sighed so dramatically that Moony thought she must be referring to the bees, and peered at them again to make sure they weren't real. "Patricia — you know, that nice lady with the lady friend? — she says, *pick* the flowers, so I pick them but I still have too many squashes. Remind me to give you some for your mother."

At mention of her mother, Moony's anger melted away. She started to cry again.

"My darling, what is it?" cried Mrs. Grose. She moved so quickly to embrace Moony that a soft-smelling pinkish cloud of face powder wafted from her cheeks onto the girl's. "Tell us darling, tell us —"

Moony sobbed luxuriously for several minutes, letting Mrs. Grose stroke her hair and feed her healthy sips of tepid brandy-laced tea. Mrs. Grose's pug wheezed anxiously at his mistress's feet and struggled to climb into Moony's lap. Eventually he succeeded. By then, Moony had calmed down enough to tell the aged woman what had happened, her rambling narrative punctuated

by hiccuping sobs and small gasps of laughter when the dog lapped excitedly at her teacup.

"Ah so," said Mrs. Grose, when she first understood that Moony was talking about the Light Children. She pressed her plump hands together and raised her tortoiseshell eyes to the ceiling. "They are having a busy day."

Moony frowned, wiping her cheeks. As though They were like the people who collected the trash or turned the water supply off at the end of the summer. But then Moony went on talking, her voice growing less tremulous as the brandy kicked in. When she finished, she sat in somewhat abashed silence and stared at the teacup she held in her damp hand. Its border of roses and cabbage butterflies took on a flushed glow from Mrs. Grose's paisley-draped Tiffany lamps. Moony looked uneasily at the door. Having confessed her story, she suddenly wanted to flee, to check on her mother, to forget the whole thing. But she couldn't just take off. She cleared her throat, and the pug growled sympathetically.

"Well," Mrs. Grose said at last. "I see I will be having lots of company this winter."

Moony stared at her uncomprehending. "I mean, your mother and Martin will be staying on," Mrs. Grose explained, and sipped her tea. Her cheeks like the patterned porcelain had a febrile glow, and her eyes were so bright that Moony wondered if she was very drunk. "So at last! there will be enough of us here to really talk about it, to *learn* —"

"Learn what?" demanded Moony. Confusion and brandy made her peevish. She put her cup down and gently shoved the pug from her lap. "I mean, what happened? *What is going on?*"

"Why, it's Them, of course," Mrs. Grose said grandly, then ducked her head, as though afraid she might be overheard and deemed insolent. "We are so *fortunate* — you are so fortunate, my dear, and your darling mother! And Martin, of course — this is a wonderful time for us, a blessed, blessed time!" At Moony's glare of disbelief she went on, "You understand, my darling — They have come, They have *greeted* your mother and Martin, it is a very exciting thing, very rare — only a very few of us —"

Mrs. Grose preened a little before going on, " — and it is always so wonderful, so miraculous, when another joins us — and now suddenly we have two!"

Moony stared at her, her hands opening and closing in her lap. "But what

happened?" she cried desperately. "What are They?"

Mrs. Grose shrugged and coughed delicately. "What are They," she repeated. "Well, Moony, that is a very good question." She heaved back onto the couch and sighed. "What are They? I do not know."

At Moony's rebellious glare she added hastily, "Well, many things, of course, we have thought They were many things, and They might be any of these or all of them or — well, none, I suppose. Fairies, or little angels of Jesus, or tree spirits — that is what a dear friend of mine believed. And some sailors thought They were will-o-the-wisps, and let's see, Miriam Hopewell, whom you don't remember but was *another* very dear friend of mine, God rest her soul, Miriam thought They came from flying saucers."

At this Moony's belligerence crumpled into defeat. She recalled the things she had seen on her mother — *devouring* her it seemed, setting her aflame — and gave a small involuntary gasp.

"But why?" she wailed. "I mean, *why*? Why should They care? What can They possibly get from us?"

Mrs. Grose enfolded Moony's hand in hers. She ran her fingers along Moony's palm as though preparing for a reading, and said, "Maybe They get something They don't have. Maybe we *give* Them something."

"But what?" Moony's voice rose, almost a shriek. "*What?*"

"Something They don't have," Mrs. Grose repeated softly. "Something everybody else has, but They don't —

"Our deaths."

Moony yanked her hand away. "Our *deaths*? My mother like, sold her soul, to — to —"

"You don't understand, darling." Mrs. Grose looked at her with mild, whiskey-colored eyes. "They don't want us to *die*. They want our *deaths*. That's why we're still at Mars Hill, me and Gary and your mother and Martin. As long as we stay here, They will keep them for us — our sicknesses, our destinies. It's something They don't have." Mrs. Grose sighed, shaking her head. "I guess They just get lonely, or bored of being immortal. Or whatever it is They are."

That's right! Moony wanted to scream. *What the hell are They?* But she only said, "So as long as you stay here you don't die? But that doesn't make any sense — I mean, John died, *he* was here —"

Mrs. Grose shrugged. "He left. And They didn't come to him,

They never greeted him...

"Maybe he didn't know — or maybe he didn't want to stay. Maybe he didn't want to live. Not everybody does, you know. *I don't want to live forever —*" She sighed melodramatically, her bosom heaving. "But I just can't seem to tear myself away."

She leaned over to hug Moony. "But don't worry now, darling. Your mother is going to be *okay*. And so is Martin. And so are you, and all of us. We're safe —"

Moony shuddered. "But I can't stay here! I have to go back to school, I have a *life* —"

"Of course you do, darling! We all do! Your life is out there —" Mrs. Grose gestured out the window, wiggling her fingers toward where the cold blue waters of the Bay lapped at the gravel. "And *ours* is *here*." She smiled, bent her head to kiss Moony so that the girl caught a heavy breath of chamomile and brandy. "Now you better go, before your mother starts to worry."

Like I was a goddamn kid, Moony thought, but she felt too exhausted to argue. She stood, bumping against the pug. It gave a muffled bark, then looked up at her and drooled apologetically. Moony leaned down to pat it and took a step toward the door. Abruptly she turned back.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. Like, I'm going. I understand, you don't know about these — about all this — I mean I know you've told me everything you can. But I just want to ask you one thing —"

Mrs. Grose placed her teacup on the edge of the coffee table and waved her fingers, smiling absently. "Of course, of course, darling. Ask away."

"How old are you?"

Mrs. Grose's penciled eyebrows lifted above mild surprised eyes. "How old am I? One doesn't *ask* a lady such things, darling. But —"

She smiled slyly, leaning back and folding her hands upon her soft bulging stomach. "If I'd been a man and had the vote, it would have gone to Mr. Lincoln."

Moony nodded, just once, her breath stuck in her throat. Then she fled the cottage.

In Bangor, the doctor confirmed that the cancer was in remission.

"It's incredible." She shook her head, staring at Ariel's test results before

tossing them ceremonially into a wastebasket. "I would say the phrase 'A living miracle' is not inappropriate here. Or voodoo, or whatever it is you do there at Mars Hill."

She waved dismissively at the open window, then bent to retrieve the tests. "You're welcome to get another opinion. I would advise it, as a matter of fact."

"Of course," Ariel said. But of course she wouldn't, then or ever. She already knew what the doctors would tell her.

There was some more paperwork, a few awkward efforts by the doctor to get Ariel to confess to some secret healing cure, some herbal remedy or therapy practiced by the kooks at the spiritualist community. But finally they were done. There was nothing left to discuss, and only a Blue Cross number to be given to the receptionist. When the doctor stood to walk with Ariel to the door, her eyes were too bright, her voice earnest and a little shaky as she said, "And look: whatever you were doing, Ms. Rising — howling at the moon, whatever — you just keep on doing it. Okay?"

"Okay." Ariel smiled, and left.

"You really can't leave, now," Mrs. Grose told Martin and Ariel that night. They were all sitting around a bonfire on the rocky beach, Diana and Gary singing "Sloop John B" in off-key harmony, Rvis and Shasta Daisy and the others disemboweling leftover lobster bodies with the remorseless patience of raccoons. Mrs. Grose spread out the fingers of her right hand and twisted a heavy filigreed ring on her pinkie, her lips pursed as she regarded Ariel. "You shouldn't have gone to Bangor, that was *very foolish*," she said, frowning. "In a few months, maybe you can go with Gary to the Beach Store. *Maybe*. But no further than that."

Moony looked sideways at her mother, but Ariel only shook her head. Her eyes were luminous, the same color as the evening sky above the Bay.

"Who would want to leave?" Ariel said softly. Her hand crept across the pebbles to touch Martin's. As Moony watched them she felt again that sharp pain in her heart, like a needle jabbing her. She would never know exactly what had happened to her mother, or to Martin. Jason would tell her nothing. Nor would Ariel or anyone else. But there they were, Ariel and Martin sitting cross-legged on the gravel strand, while all around them the others ate and drank and sang as though nothing had happened at all; or as though whatever

had occurred had been decided on long ago. Without looking at each other, Martin and her mother smiled, Martin somewhat wryly. Mrs. Grose nodded.

"That's right," the old woman said. When she tossed a stone into the bonfire an eddy of sparks flared up. Moony jumped, startled, and looked up into the sky. For an instant she held her breath, thinking, *At last!* — it was Them and all would be explained. The Fairy King would offer his benediction to the united and loving couples; the dour Puritan would be avenged; the Fool would sing his sad sweet song and everyone would wipe away happy tears.

But no. The sparks blew off into ashes, filling the air with a faint smell of incense. When she turned back to the bonfire, Jason was holding out a flaming marshmallow on a stick, laughing, and the others had segued into a drunken rendition of "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

"Take it, Moony," he urged her, the charred mess slipping from the stick. "Eat it quick, for luck."

She leaned over until it slid onto her tongue, a glowing coal of sweetness and earth and fire; and ate it quick, for luck.

Long after midnight they returned to their separate bungalows. Jason lingered with Moony by the dying bonfire, stroking her hair and staring at the lights of Dark Harbor. There was the crunch of gravel behind them. He turned to see his father, standing silhouetted in the soft glow of the embers.

"Jason," he called softly. "Would you mind coming back with me? I —

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there's something we need to talk about."

Jason gazed down at Moony. Her eyes were heavy with sleep, and he lowered his head to kiss her, her mouth still redolent of burnt sugar. "Yeah, okay," he said, and stood. "You be okay, Moony?"

Moony nodded, yawning. "Sure." As he walked away, Jason looked back and saw her stretched out upon the gravel beach, arms outspread as she stared up at the three-quarter moon riding close to the edge of Mars Hill.

"So what's going on?" he asked his father when they reached the cottage. Martin stood at the dining room table, his back to Jason. He picked up a small stack of envelopes and tapped them against the table, then turned to his son.

"I'm going back," he said. "Home. I got a letter from Brandon today," — Brandon was his agent — "there's going to be a show at the Frick Gallery, and a symposium. They want me to speak."

Jason stared at him, uncomprehending. His long pale hair fell into his face, and he pushed it impatiently from his eyes. "But — you can't," he said at last. "You'll die. You can't leave here. That's what Adele said. You'll *die*."

Martin remained silent, before replacing the envelopes and shaking his head. "We don't know that. Even before, we — *I* — didn't know that. Nobody knows that, ever."

Jason stared at him in disbelief. His face grew flushed as he said, "But you can't! You're sick — shit, Dad, look at John, you can't just —"

His father pursed his lips, tugged at his ponytail. "No, Jason, I *can*."

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Suddenly he looked surprised, a little sheepish even, and said more softly. "I mean, I *will*. There's too much for me to give up, Jason. Maybe it sounds stupid, but I think it's important that I go back. Not right away. I think I'll stay on for a few weeks, maybe until the end of October. You know, see autumn in New England and all. But after that — well, there's work for me to do at home, and — "

Jason's voice cracked as he shook his head furiously. "Dad. No. You'll — you'll die."

Martin shrugged. "I might. I mean, I guess I will, sometime. But — well, everybody dies." His mouth twisted into a smile as he stared at the floor. "Except Mrs. Grose."

Jason continued to shake his head. "But — you saw Them — They came, They must've done *something* — "

Martin looked up, his eyes feverishly bright. "They did. That's why I'm leaving. Look, Jason, I can't explain, all right? But what if you had to stay here, instead of going on to Bowdoin? What if Moony left, and everyone else — would you stay at Mars Hill? *Forever?*"

Jason was silent. Finally, "I think you should stay," he said, a little desperately. "Otherwise whatever They did was wasted."

Martin shook his head. His hand closed around a tube of viridian on the table and he raised it, held it in front of him like a weapon. His eyes glittered as he said, "Oh no, Jason. Not wasted. Nothing is wasted, not ever." And tilting his head he smiled, held out his arm until his son came to him and Martin embraced him, held him there until Jason's sobs quieted, and the moon began to slide behind Mars Hill.

Jason drove Moony to the airport on Friday. Most of his things already had been shipped from San Francisco to Bowdoin College, but Moony had to return to Kamensic Village and the Loomises, to gather her clothes and books for school and make all the awkward explanations and arrangements on her own. Friends and relations in New York had been told that Ariel was undergoing some kind of experimental therapy, an excuse they bought as easily as they'd bought most of Ariel's other strange ideas. Now Moony didn't want to talk to anyone else on the phone. She didn't want to talk to anyone at all, except for Jason.

"It's kind of on the way to Brunswick," he explained when Diana

protested his driving Moony. "Besides, Diana, if you took her she'd end up crying the whole way. This way I can keep her intact at least until the airport."

Diana gave in, finally. No one suggested that Ariel drive.

"Look down when the plane flies over Mars Hill," Ariel said, hugging her daughter by the car. "We'll be looking for you."

Moony nodded, her mouth tight, and kissed her mother. "You be okay," she whispered, the words lost in Ariel's tangled hair.

"I'll be okay," Ariel said, smiling.

Behind them Jason and Martin embraced. "If you're still here I'll be up Columbus Weekend," said Jason. "Maybe sooner if I run out of money."

Martin shook his head. "If you run out of money you better go see your mother."

It was only twenty minutes to the airport. "Don't wait," Moony said to Jason, as the same woman who had taken her ticket loaded her bags onto the little Beechcraft. "I mean it. If you do I'll cry and I'll kill you."

Jason nodded. "Righto. We don't want any bad publicity. '*Noted Queer Activist's Son Slain by Girlfriend at Local Airport. Wind Shear Is Blamed.*'"

Moony hugged him, drew away to study his face. "I'll call you in the morning."

He shook his head. "Tonight. When you get home. So I'll know you got in safely. 'Cause it's dangerous out there." He made an awful face, then leaned over to kiss her. "Ciao, Moony."

"Ciao, Jason."

She could feel him watching her as she clambered into the little plane, but she didn't look back. Instead she smiled tentatively at the few other passengers — a businessman with a tie loose around his neck, two middle-aged women with L.L. Bean shopping bags — and settled into a seat by the window.

During takeoff she leaned over to see if she could spot Jason. For an instant she had a flash of his car, like a crimson leaf blowing south through the darkening green of pines and maples. Then it was gone.

Trailers of mist whipped across the little window. Moony shivered, drew her sweatshirt tight around her chest. She felt that beneath her everything she had ever known was shrinking, disappearing, swallowed by golden light; but somehow it was okay. As the Beechcraft banked over Penobscot Bay she

pressed her face close against the glass, waiting for the gap in the clouds that would give her a last glimpse of the gray and white cottages tumbling down Mars Hill, the wind-riven pier where her mother and Martin and all the rest stood staring up into the early autumn sky, tiny as fairy people in a child's book. For an instant it seemed that something hung over them, a golden cloud like a September haze. But then the blinding sun made her glance away. When she looked down again the golden haze was gone. But the others were still there, waving and calling out soundlessly until the plane finally turned south and bore her away, away from summer and its silent visitors — her mother's cancer, Martin's virus, the Light Children and Their hoard of stolen sufferings — away, away, away from them all, and back to the welcoming world.



"You know what I like about heaven? It's all good guys."

F&SF COMPETITION

REPORT ON COMPETITION 61

In this competition, we asked you to excerpt 100 words from a future article on a science that doesn't yet exist, but uses ordinary words (e.g. bite, memory, address, program) in ways as foreign to us as the above would be to a reader of 1890...yet a tantalizing hint still comes across. The brave souls who attempted this contest should all pat themselves on the back: this was tough! Each entry was unique and entertaining. The top three entries get extra high marks for humor and creativity.

FIRST PLACE goes to J. Fischette of Davis, CA, who created not only a whole new language (complete with new spelling based on current internet trends) but a whole new world. His winning entry is from a Gamma Quadrant Press Release (stellernet:jfisch/mars.redot):

The brakethru lite translator RGB to CMYK visual mode has made cybernet contact w/the Omicron Beings a Vitreal™ (virtual reality). To access the Beings, called C-Mikeys, phase your system to STELLERNET:OMICRON.JPEG.

The preferred communication mode is either Neon or Metallic reflective pixels. Descreening and Tweeking are tabu and will result in sharp unmasking.

Netters using antique ky-board PwerPZ systems will be unable to access Vitreal™ without a HAL-in module. Download your IB/Apl/Micros resource center for interface info :)

SECOND PLACE goes to Mike Allen of Roanoke, VA, who sent in two stellar entries which remind us that computers aren't the only thing that influence language:

The first is excerpted from the Xenological Travelogue of A. Gordon Poe, "On Planet William, Among the Gibsonites":

In a varley mood, the three of us brunnered together and asimoved. Things anned so mccaffrey, we wanted another tiptree. I proposed an ellison, but Brewski started sterling. She screamed — her voice rose three octavia — "Don't you butler me!" Then I asked her de lint, and she sam delanied immediately. But now Roger zelaznied,

whining that he wouldn't cross that heinlein. So we brinned him in a bujold, and somtowed merrily on. What a rusch!

The second entry comes from "Studies of Triple Trochaic Psychoses," Poemzine, Nov. 2019:

...just in time to avert a terrible tragedy, subjects C and D had formed a pair of yeats, and Subject A was plathing uncontrollably. Applying the fourth canto of the Tennyson Principle, we iambed the yeats with a loaded shelley and sonneted the poe plathing woman with a dose of pentameter frost. One of the yeats continued browning for some time afterward, but the other one completely blaked. Subject A, thankfully, came to her stanzas.

The disaster averted, we decided it was time to re-examine the Byronic Method...

The first RUNNER UP is Tony Cimasko from Penfield, New York, who excels in imagery:

Margaret Mkewe, Volunteer3, summarized her first day: "Dr. Henry examined his spider's work two weeks after planting it. 'Nice web, real nice.' He beamed, tracing on

the scan the geometry of silk threaded through the pupa's head. I was to test the spider, simple trials. That night I fed the spider its flies. After midnight, rather than kicking me awake, the pupa was whispering, 'The Republicans will win easy...' commenting on everything the spider had regurgitated for it. I patted my belly. The bugger'd better have better conversation for the doctors and nurses when he comes out."

The Second RUNNER UP is Sue Anderson of East Providence, Rhode Island, for her world-building:

I arrived at the yards at 7:18 a.m. CST. I unzipped the rails and let the conductors load the passengers into their private car. Checking the tickets, I found we'd picked up a couple of bindlestiffs, but the bulls deactivated them easily. Then I opened the club car for six hours. After that we pulled out of the station, flushing the passengers' output along the right of way. Chromatography showed potentially useful amounts of human insulin among the sewage — we were on the right track.

The genetic engineers!

MERCHANDIZING:

Paul Newman sells salad dressing, popcorn, and spaghetti sauce. What would science fiction writers sell if they went into another business? (Well, Harlan Ellison would sell angry candy.)

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Road, W. Cornwall, CT06796. Entries must be received by August 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE a special treat in store for you in our September issue. Ray Bradbury returns to these pages for the first time since 1988 with the first of two short stories he has sent us. In "From the Dust Returned," we learn about a Dust Witch, not the one who traveled with Dark's Pandemonium Shows, but another, born into death two thousand years earlier. Young Timothy Light discovers her in his family's attic and the discovery leads to one of the strangest experiences in his short life.

Popular writer David Gerrold contributes a creepy aliens-among-us story called "The Martian Child." The story is about a writer, rather like David, who adopts a child who seems a bit different, somehow. Even though the "Martian Child" feels like science fiction, we hesitate at using the word "fiction." It frightens us to consider the fact that truth might be stranger...

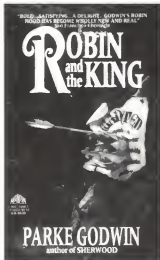
Also in September, Jack Cady returns with a Victorian fable called "Our Ground and Every Fragrant Tree is Shaded." Jack's most recent story for *F&SF*, "The Night We Buried Road Dog," won the Nebula for best novella of the year and, at the time of this writing, is a finalist for the Horror Writers of America's Stoker Award, CompuServe's Homer Award, and science fiction's prestigious Hugo Award.

Finally, David Hardy provides our cover, a lovely science fiction landscape which may inspire some stories of its own.

In future issues, we have more treats in store. Our October/November issue has a cover by Jill Bauman illustrating Mike Resnick's powerful novella, "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge." Other upcoming cover stories include Ian MacLeod's "Turkiluk," Michael Coney's "Tea and Hamsters," and Marcos Donnelly's "El Hijo de Hernez." We also have, after a two year delay, the late Isaac Asimov's 400th science column, assembled with loving care by his wife Janet Asimov. So locate our subscription form on page 153 and make sure you don't miss an issue.



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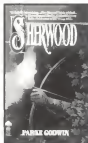
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